

*The Tao of
Fully Feeling
Harvesting
forgiveness
out of blame*



Pete Walker

**THE TAO OF
FULLY FEELING**

HARVESTING FORGIVENESS
OUT OF BLAME

PETE WALKER

THE TAO OF FULLY FEELING

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*To my best friend, Sat Ferren
who was like a mother to me.*

*To Jim Dowe
“Walt Whitman in a Buick”
my most significant father figure.*

*To my sisters Pat, Diane, and Sharon
whose love helped keep
my heart alive in childhood.*

*I see there is no prison except that which I construct to protect myself from feeling
my pain.*

– Sheldon Kopp

*To be able to invite pain to join in my experience
and not have to control my life to avoid
pain is such a freedom!*

– Christina Baldwin

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TERMS

The term *dysfunctional family* refers to any family that damaged a child's inborn self-esteem through any constellation of verbal, spiritual, emotional, or physical abuse and neglect as defined in [Appendix A](#) and [Chapter 8](#).

The terms *adult child*, *survivor*, and *recoveree* will be used interchangeably to describe any individual injured by abusive or neglectful parenting in childhood. The term adult child does not imply that adult survivors of dysfunctional families act childishly. It refers to the fact that they arrive in adulthood with many of their developmental needs unmet. Many adult children have yet to acquire the full emotional, relational, and self-expressive capacities of mature adults.

The term *inner child* refers to the part of the self that is developmentally arrested because important kinds of nurturing were missing in childhood. To some survivors this is merely a useful concept to identify those needs; to others, like myself, there seems to be a historical child-self residing in the unconscious still waiting for the safety and nurturance it needs to come forth and develop a fully functioning adult-self.

The term *recovery* is used in two ways: firstly, as a global term to describe the overall process of healing the traumas of childhood abuse and neglect. Many recoverees describe this with the phrase: "I am in recovery." *Recovery* is also used to identify specific developmental goals as in: "I am working on the recovery of my feelings," and "My therapy is helping me to recover my assertiveness." Recovery is best seen as an ongoing process – a process of recovering rather than becoming recovered. This helps to avoid the pitfalls of all-or-none evaluating and black-and-white thinking that are common legacies of the dysfunctional family.

The term *codependent* is used in a narrow sense to describe the adult child who habitually over-sacrifices his needs and desires for someone else. Codependency is commonly the result of a childhood in which the parents' needs were routinely elevated over those of the child's.

The term *toxic shame* describes a distorted mental and emotional state that afflicts many adult children with long periods of feeling overwhelmed and incapacitated by self-loathing. Toxic shame is the product of prolonged exposure in childhood to parental disapproval and disgust. ([Chapter 7](#) explores the irreplaceable role of blame in healing toxic shame.)

The term *effective grieving* highlights the fact that most survivors are not able to embrace their grief fully and shamelessly enough to find the precious relief it offers. ([Chapter 5](#) explores the most common causes of “failed” grieving.)

While the nouns *feeling* and *emotion* are used interchangeably throughout this book, the verbs *feeling* and *emoting* are distinguished from one another. Feeling is the process of passively attuning to and accepting inner affective experiences without trying to change them. Emoting is the process of actively expressing and releasing inner affective experiences, as in crying, “angering” or laughing.

INTRODUCTION

*since feeling is first
who pays any attention
to the syntax of things
will never wholly kiss you;*

– e.e. cummings

Industrial societies are becoming as soulless as the machine-icons they elevate above humanity. Industrial societies treat feelings as if they are obsolete parts. *The Tao of Fully Feeling* is a guide to reclaiming the emotional richness we are stripped of in childhood, as our land is stripped of timber and coal.

The Tao of Fully Feeling is born out of my own personal struggle and the struggles of my clients and friends to reclaim their feelings. It is an invitation to discover how feeling and emoting naturally re-prioritize our values so that love and intimacy are once again elevated above acquisition and consumption.

The Tao of Fully Feeling focuses a great deal on the dysfunctional family since that is where society's dictums against feeling are most stringently enforced. I agree with John Bradshaw that our culture is afflicted by an epidemic of poor parenting.

My ideas about family dysfunctionality concur with a number of modern books whose titles alone vividly capture the collapse of the institution of parenting in our culture: *Prisoners of Childhood*, *Betrayal of Innocence*, *The Secret Everyone Knows*, *Hearts That We Broke Long Ago*, *Soul Murder: Persecution in the Family*, *After The Tears: Reclaiming the Personal Losses of Childhood*, *Getting Divorced From Mom And Dad*, *Healing The Shame That Binds You*, and *My Name Is Chellis, I'm in Recovery from Western Civilization*.

Family dysfunctionality is so commonplace and normal in our society that it is difficult to recognize. Ironically, those who did not suffer extended physical abuse in childhood are the most likely to ignore the adverse effects of their childhoods. Nonetheless, most of the adult suffering I witness as a psychotherapist is rooted in nonphysical forms of childhood abuse and neglect.

The most common characteristic of adult suffering is self-hatred, and the most common focus of this hatred is our feelings. Most of us were attacked, shamed or abandoned for being emotional at very early ages. Before we can remember, most of us were forced to renounce our feelings and hate ourselves for having them. This book offers practical advice on breaking this unconscious, self-destructive habit.

The perspective and advice that I offer here are informed by a wide variety of life experiences and studies. My personal journey of emotional recovery is interwoven throughout. Let me begin here with the disturbing observation that the U. S. Army, during the height of the Viet Nam war, was a warmer, more nurturing home to me than my childhood home.

This surprising understanding came to me via a series of recurring dreams in which I had reenlisted and felt more content and fulfilled than I ever felt in real life.

I was perplexed by these dreams for the entire decade they occurred. Had they been nightmares, they would have made perfect sense, for I never wanted to be in the army. Any notion that the army was of some benefit to me was unthinkable. I had pined endlessly for the end of my tour of duty while I was incarcerated there.

I was so befuddled by these dreams that I occasionally prayed: “Please God, tell me that this doesn’t mean I’m supposed to reenlist!”

I eventually began to understand these dreams by comparing my army experience with life in my family. The drill sergeants and officers who trained me to be a combat platoon leader were as verbally and emotionally abusive as my parents. The impending threat of physical violence was also familiar, although by some grace my combat duty was along the Korean DMZ – considerably less dangerous than Viet Nam.

The army was different than my family however, in that I was never actually physically assaulted there, whereas at home physical abuse was an ongoing occurrence until I was a teenager.

As I pondered this distinction, I discovered other important differences between the army and my family. Once the initial, relatively brief degradation phase of training was completed, the army was significantly more hospitable than my family. Unlike my family, clear, well-defined rules offered me the possibility of “getting it right,” of fitting in, of gaining appreciation and respect.

Life in the army was not a constant maze of double binds and no-win situations. And even though there were many unpleasant and dangerous on-the-job situations, there were many times that were safe and free from imminent attack. Even notoriously stressful “boot camp” had more overall safety in it for me than my family! What a blessed relief it was to eat meals in the mess hall where the person next to me didn’t suddenly scream at me or hit me, as so often occurred at family mealtime. I relaxed enough to assimilate my food more effectively, and I put on thirty healthy pounds in the first six months.

I also made many friends who valued me. I shone at tasks I was assigned, and was rewarded for accomplishing them. My confidence and assertiveness grew in leaps and bounds, and I began to believe that I might have an iota of worth after all. (This is not to say that I was instantly cured of the belief, common to many adult children, that my success was a fluke. Much of the time I thought I was merely fooling my superiors. Surely when they discovered the real me – the defective one that my parents saw with little difficulty – I would quickly be demoted to the most degraded position. I was still afflicted with the infamous “impostor syndrome” that taints the successes of many adult children.)

When I understood these dreams they ceased. Their function was served as soon as they initiated the gradual erosion of my “idyllic childhood” illusion.

I was also studying psychology, sociology, and anthropology at university around this time. My studies accelerated the dissolution of my illusions about my “perfect” family. I discovered glaring evidence that Western parenting practices have been devolving since the Industrial Revolution. I eventually became convinced that most American families grossly belie our treasured Brady Bunch ideal.

My belief that we are suffering a parenting crisis is also grounded in my six years of experiences living with or near non-industrialized people: three years in Africa and Asia, and

three years adjacent to an Aboriginal Reserve in Northern Australia.

In comparing pre- and post-industrial parenting practices, it seems evident to me that Western parents have lost touch with their emotionally-based parenting instincts. This factor alone causes most of our children a great deal of unnecessary and inadvertent damage and deprivation. This observation is epitomized in the reaction of the Native Americans of California to the first Western settlers. They were so taken back by the Europeans' lack of compassion for their children that they disdainfully labeled them The-People-Who-Beat-Their-Children.

I have had innumerable experiences of envying the relationships between parents and children in "primitive" cultures. Parents in these cultures guide and care for their children in commonsense ways that we have long abandoned, just as we have abandoned many of our feelings and instincts. Alice Miller describes the parenting process that robs us of our feelings before we can consciously own and value them:

. . . (We) have all developed the art of not experiencing feelings, for a child can only experience his feelings when there is somebody there who accepts him fully, understands and supports him. If that is missing, if the child must risk losing the mother's love, or that of her substitute, then he cannot experience these feelings secretly "just for himself" but fails to experience them at all.

As I meditated on Alice Miller's observation one day, this poem came to me:

They cauterized my feelings
To stop the bleeding of my tears
And now I drown alone inside
A pool that's hemorrhaged for years.

Parents in non-industrialized societies love their children in ways that are beyond the capacity of most Western parents. As much as we genuinely try and sincerely want to love our children, we customarily fail miserably because we are divorced from our emotional natures. Afraid and ashamed of our emotions and our inner experience, we do not inhabit the parts of our bodies that generate loving feelings.

There is a Native American story that highlights the dearth of love in our culture. A Western anthropologist living with and studying the Hopi Indians noticed over time that most of the Hopi songs were about water. One day he asked the shaman:

How is it that you sing so much about water? In my culture, love is the theme that is most commonly expressed in our songs? Do your people not value love?

The shaman of this desert culture replied:

In my culture our songs are frequently prayers, and we sing and pray for the precious things in life of which we do not have enough. Love is not one of them.

The Tao of Fully Feeling outlines a journey back to feeling and back to authentic, emotionally-based experiences of love. If we are ever to reacquire our inborn ability to effectively love our children, we must first learn to love ourselves in all our emotional states. We begin this, as absurd as it may seem, by forgiving ourselves and others for having feelings! We accomplish this by refusing to emulate our leaders and our parents – by breaking the habit acquired from them of blaming and shaming ourselves for most of our emotional responses to life.

I hope that this book will help you understand that you suffered serious losses in childhood if your parents adhered to and followed the norms of modern parenting practices. Your attention is directed to [Appendix A](#) which is designed to help you make a more informed assessment of this assertion.

I have been down many blind alleys in my attempts to come to terms with my emotions. I've repressed them, swallowed them, drowned them in drink, ascended above them in clouds of hemp, starved them out, interred them with food, transcended them in meditation, outrun them, outsmarted them with rationalization, exorcised them, handed them over to higher beings, transmuted them into pretty lights, and even briefly felt them before purging them in dramatic catharses that promised to render them finally extinct.

I was misled by a plethora of self-help books, workshops, hands-on cures, psychological disciplines, and spiritual practices in my attempts to procure permanent relief from the emotional pain that so besieged me. Most of the cul-de-sacs I explored in my flight from my feelings shared a common characteristic: the promise of an everlasting transcendence of normal emotional states like anger, sorrow, and fear.

The most detrimental of these were those promising permanent attainment of “preferable” emotional states like happiness, love, and peace. I vividly remember the abject disappointment I experienced when the short-lived benefits of one approach or another became so historical I could no longer pretend they were mine. Time after time promises of permanent contentment were broken as the emotions that were supposed to be permanently resolved inevitably returned. Inundated with toxic shame for failing once again to transcend my suffering, (as others seemed to be doing), I inevitably embarked on yet another desperate search for a new panacea for my feelings.

How novel and amazing that all I have to do now with my feelings is accept them! Sometimes I can hardly believe how easy it is to simply feel them or give them benign expression. Am I really the same person who twenty years ago belonged to that vast contingent of men who don't know a feeling from a fig?

I do not wish to imply that all the approaches mentioned above are without value. Some of them are useful tools when they are not used to banish feelings, and they are included in this eclectic approach to emotional healing.

I hope this book helps you avoid hurting yourself, as I have, by naively ascribing to philosophies and practices that guarantee permanent happiness. Such paths spawn sisyphian efforts to stay “up,” and inevitably create unnecessary self-dissatisfaction, no matter how well-

intentioned or momentarily helpful they are.

Thomas Moore in *Care of The Soul* labels the be-all and end-all pursuit of happiness “the salvation fantasy.” The salvation fantasy is a beguiling, useless detour in our personal evolution. Sheldon Kopp titled his book *If You Meet The Buddha On The Road, Kill Him* to encourage us to bypass this detour and save ourselves from the unnecessary self-sabotage of emotional perfectionism.

The uplifting emotional effects of any growth technique or teaching, no matter how healthy and genuine, inevitably give way to normal, equally healthy experiences of less exalted feeling. At such times those who believe they should be unshakably cheerful and transcendent can only resort to blaming themselves as intrinsically flawed for this normal fluctuation in their sense of happiness and equanimity.

Human beings were not created to be permanently anything in their emotional experience. No one binds us to the rack of emotional perfectionism any longer. We can climb off and strive instead for more realistic emotional goals. A steadfast self-regard – one that is not diminished by emotional fluctuation – is something that we can all healthily aim for and increasingly attain.

There are all too many spiritual leaders and cognitive-behavioral psychologists pointing us in the wrong direction by insisting we can and should eliminate unpleasant feelings. Many New Age leaders erroneously proffer the concept of enlightenment as if it were a permanently attainable, pain-free state; yet in my twenty-five years of spiritual practice and twenty years of psychological exploration, I have yet to meet a guru, therapist, teacher or devotee who has achieved a permanently blissful state and who no longer experiences occasional bouts of emotional pain. How sad it is to see so many still chasing this illusory carrot, and continuously scorning themselves for not attaining it.

Please understand that I am not in any way devaluing the wonderful gifts that are available with effective spiritual practice. Rather, I am trying to expose the fallacy that spiritual practice can do away with the necessity of “emotional practice.” We cannot be healthy human beings without accepting and experiencing the full range of human feelings.

Perhaps I am misinformed about this, and maybe there are some rare souls out there who truly embody permanent enlightenment or unshakable happiness. Maybe the newest avatar of the latest derivative of the EST training has a formula for truly achieving total mastery of the emotional nature. Maybe walking on hot coals without feeling pain, as participants do in the latest popular weekend seminar, proves we “should” be able to transcend other less intense, emotional forms of pain. However, since I’ve yet to see anything but hubris in those who claim they have found heaven here on earth, it strikes me that the odds of attaining imperturbable bliss are extremely poor.

How grateful I am that I have finally come to understand R.D. Laing’s wise pronouncement: “The only pain that can be avoided is the pain that comes from trying to avoid unavoidable pain.” I now know that the lion’s share of my past emotional pain, well over ninety percent of it, came from the myriad ways I was taught to hate, numb, and run away from my feelings.

The greatest turning point in my life was supplanting my quest for permanent happiness and transcendence with a stubborn willingness to be there for myself in every feeling state. The rewards of this have been wondrous. Sometimes my tears are like jewels that refract resplendent colorfulness into my life. My anger now comes as a gentle flame that warms me with an ever-increasing passion for life. My fear is sometimes a beacon that illuminates new pathways for me

to follow into a wider appreciation of life. My envy shows me what I still yearn to develop in myself.

I have even found wonders in depression. Depression sometimes calls me into stillness, liberates me from crucifixion on the clock of time, invites me into an ever-deepening place of peace within myself, and allows me to rest inside my body as if it were the most luxurious easy chair imaginable.

And grieving, particularly when it is intense, delivers me into a sleep so deep that I feel as if I am a dormant seed safely hidden in the rich loam of mother earth with nothing to do but wait for the rays of the sun to awaken me.

The willingness to fully feel bestows a liberating emotional flexibility on us. I continually marvel at how allowing myself to feel bad resolves that feeling and restores me to feeling good much more quickly than resisting it ever did.

Our feelings vitalize and enrich us to the degree that we accept them in their full diversity. Now is the time to renounce stultifying allegiances to TV heroes who encourage us to monotonously hum singular tunes of toughness, coolness, sweetness or forced frivolity. Our emotions are our own music, and no monotone or three-note ditty can create in us any fervor for being alive. We become symphonies when we reclaim all the notes of the emotional scale.

I have been on a long, map-less journey back to feeling, and I hope the map I present here provides you with a shortcut in your emotional recovery. I hope you will discover some of the riches I describe herein and that you will be enlivened by a broader emotional experience of life. I pray that you will find the sense of belonging and fulfillment that comes from being emotionally free with yourself and your intimates.

1

THE IMPORTANCE OF RECOVERING THE WHOLE EMOTIONAL NATURE

Feeling tells us how and to what extent a thing is important to us.

– Carl Jung

America is a nation of emotional orphans ... adult children grew up without effective parents. Tens of millions of our friends, neighbors, spouses, and lovers had childhoods where their parents were not emotionally there for them.

– Dennis Wholey

Feelings and emotions are energetic states that do not magically dissipate when they are ignored. Much of our unnecessary emotional pain is the distressing pressure that comes from not releasing emotional energy. When we do not attend to our feelings, they accumulate inside us and create a mounting anxiety that we commonly dismiss as stress.

Stress is not merely a detrimental physiological reaction to noxious external stimuli such as noise, pollution, commuting, long work hours, and “hustle and bustle.” Stress is also the painful internal pressure of accumulated emotional energy.

Grieving, explored at length herein, is the most effective stress-release mechanism that human beings have. Grieving is a safe, healthy release valve for our internal pressure cookers of emotion. I have had numerous experiences of feeling as if I were about to explode that were immediately discharged with a good cry. I see others obtain this same wonderful relief almost daily in my work in private practice.

We suffer many dire consequences when we are unwilling to feel. The price of emotional repression is a constant, wasteful expenditure of energy that leaves many of us depressed and taciturn. Perpetually enervated, more and more of us sink into the apathy and ennui of the “seen that - been there - done that” syndrome. When this occurs, we forfeit our destiny of growing into the vitally expressive and life-celebratory beings we were born to be.

Our war on feelings forces our emotions to turn against us. Much of our unnecessary suffering is caused by the ghosts of our murdered emotions wafting into consciousness and haunting us as hurtful thinking. Denied emotions taint our thoughts with fearful worry, dour self-doubt, and angry self-criticism.

We also risk “acting out” our emotions unconsciously when we are unwilling to feel them. Sarcasm, criticality, habitual lateness, and “forgotten” commitments are common unconscious expressions of anger. Ironically, these passive-aggressive behaviors leave us in even greater emotional pain because they cause others to distrust and dislike us.

The epidemics of overeating, over-medicating, and overworking that plague America are also rooted in our mass retreat from feeling. When we are feeling-phobic, we are compelled to distract ourselves from our emotions with mood-altering substances, workaholism or constant busyness. Many of us, as Anne Wilson Schaef points out in *When Society Becomes An Addict*, are addicted to at least one self-destructive substance or process.

Ironically, our distractions typically add to the underlying pain we are trying to avoid. With chronic use, they eventually do grave damage to our bodies. Our frenzied pace and use of chemicals (prescribed, illicit, or over-the-counter) numb us so thoroughly that we often don't feel their debilitating effects until we are seriously ill.

We have become so resistant to feeling pain that we are continuously inventing new ways not to feel. The widespread narcotization of housewives with Valium in the fifties and sixties set a precedent for the current mushrooming anesthetization of both sexes with modern anti-depressants. Drugs like Prozac, Zoloft, and Paxil are currently being used as “designer drugs,” and many general practitioners, with little psychiatric training, liberally prescribe them to anyone who complains of feeling bad.

Examples of this were reported in a 1995 Frontline television special. This program documented the current widespread trend to overuse Prozac and focused on a Washington state psychologist who prescribes Prozac for 100% of his clients, and who won't treat new clients unless they take Prozac. On camera, he told one prospective client: “Your true self is not available to you without this medication.” Unfortunately, I meet more and more therapists who immediately recommend Prozac to their clients without first exploring grieving as an antidote to depression and stress.

In the war that our culture wages against feeling, emotions are becoming an endangered species. We are ubiquitously besieged by familial and societal expectations to be “cool.” The pose of acting as if nothing can hurt or affect us has insidiously become our model of health and evolution. Many of us have become so cool that we are emotionally cold and chillingly aloof. In the words of Robert Bly:

. . . the covering up of painful emotions inside us . . . has become in our country the national and private style. We have established, with awesome verve, the animal of denial as the guiding beast of the nation's life.

Nowhere, not in our most private moments, nor in the company of our closest friends, do we feel safe to explore our feelings. Anger, depression, envy, sadness, fear, distrust, etc., are all

as integral to life as bread and flowers and streets. Yet these feelings commonly evoke shame and dread in us the moment they arise – even in those of us who are stalwart in the face of every other life contingency.

Those who dare to express feelings that are anything but positive are increasingly seen as pitiful and unevolved for not choosing more exalted states. What a terrible abandonment of the natural human inclination, still extant in non-industrialized pockets of the world, to offer compassion to an anguished friend.

A shoulder to cry on and permission to have a “good bitch and moan” are disappearing sacraments in industrialized societies. In our culture, empathy – at its best – is advising our aggrieved friends to “look on the bright side” and to remember that “it could be worse.”

This contrasts with tribal New Guinea where men and women alike participate wholeheartedly in annual festivals of grieving; all day long they hold and comfort each other as they cry about the loss of the truly halcyon days of their childhoods.

We are cut off from the normal human kindnesses of encouraging our intimates to express their feelings so that their pain isn’t locked inside and transformed into anxiety, worry, and self-disgust.

Year by year we manifest more and more of the 1969 prediction of noted psychoanalyst Rollo May:

I do believe that there is in our society a definite trend toward a state of affectless-ness as an attitude toward life; a character state.

Did God make a terrible mistake imbuing us with the feeling function that so distinguishes us from the robots and androids we seem to be emulating?

Perhaps God is about to issue a new commandment: “Thou shalt not feel or express emotional pain!” If so we may all wind up in a world that is chillingly devoid of feeling. Lesley Hazelton in *The Right To Feel Bad* describes such a world:

Schizophrenics know this world. They have withdrawn into it, away from the whole realm of human interaction and relationship – even in extreme cases, from the ability to feel physical as well as psychological pain. This is a state of severe emotional disturbance. Yet it is very close to the currently ideal state of no “negative” feelings.

HALTING THE FLIGHT FROM FEELINGS

People are not turning to drugs and alcohol by the millions to quiet pain they are recognizing and labeling.

– DennisW holey

When a child is not allowed to experience feelings of sadness, anger, loss, and frustration, his or her real feelings become neurotic and distorted; in adulthood, that child will unconsciously arrange life to repeat these same repressions of feeling. Child psychologist Bruno Bettelheim laments that children are not being allowed legitimate suffering. He states that even the books children read in school show life as nothing but a succession of pleasures. Nobody is really angry, nobody truly suffers, there are no real emotions.

– Susanne Short

The disease of emotional emaciation is epidemic and hundreds of millions of industrialized people are emotionally impoverished and deadened. Our vast array of seemingly sophisticated distractions leave us more emotionally hurt and lost than human beings have ever been before. As we become increasingly driven and compulsive, real experiences of peace elude us. Constant busyness stresses and wears us out on the treadmill of never accomplishing enough. We unconsciously dread stopping or having unstructured time lest the feelings we are fleeing catch up with us and pounce into awareness.

Some of the most beautiful things of life – sex, food, exercise, conversation, learning, and work – lose their quality because our frenzied pace makes it impossible to savor them. Rarely do we slow down long enough to digest the full pleasure of these activities.

How sad it is that we sacrifice our peace because we are not still enough to feel, experience, and work through the undigested emotions that drive us, that rumble in our bellies as anxiety, that “toxify” our thoughts as constant worry, that make us run as if we were stuck in a constant jailbreak from our selves!

We can stop the mindless running. Experiences of peace and contentment underlie our undigested feelings. We can learn to safely feel and express all our emotions, and discover the deep comfort of full, undistracted inhabitancy of our bodies. We can be transformed from “human doings,” a term coined by John Bradshaw, back into human beings.

Anthropologists Eli and Beth Halpern remind us that peacefulness is a natural condition for human beings. They report: In Micronesian, there’s a word, *kukaro*, which has no corresponding word in English. When people say they are going to *kukaro*, they mean they are going to relax, sit around, hang out. They are being, not doing.

Many of us cannot remember the last time we weren’t being – or obsessing about being – productive. Many of us have forgotten how we used to be bedazzled by such everyday wonders as marveling at a spider web, finding an animal shape in the clouds, exploring the delicate intricacy of the pistils and stamens of a flower.

It is time to rediscover the emotional vitality of the child within us. Our inner child can find enduring satisfaction in simple pleasures because s/he does not pursue them purely to escape inner emotional turmoil. Perhaps the vision of the emotionally vital poet Walt Whitman will motivate you to reconnect with the ardor of your abandoned inner child:

*I believe a leaf of grass is no less than the journey-work of the stars,
And the running blackberry would adorn the parlours of heaven,*

*And a mouse is miracle enough to stagger sextillions of infidels . . .
And I or you pocketless of a dime may purchase the pick of the earth,
And to glance with an eye or show a bean in its pod confounds the
learning of all times . . .*

Many of us balk at the idea of welcoming our feelings because we rarely witness healthy emotional expression. The small percentage of people in our culture who do express feelings are often emotional in obnoxious ways, and many individuals “under the influence” are pathetic or hurtful in their unbridled emotionalism.

There is also a small but highly visible segment of our population which suffers from borderline personality disorder. Borderlines typically express their emotions punitively and explosively. They rage and sob convulsively at the drop of a hat, often in a manner that makes us feel controlled and manipulated. Their extreme emotional behaviors further convince us that we are wise to hide our feelings.

There is a third type of individual who gives feelings a bad name by stubbornly holding onto them until they become embittered attitudes. Those who are perpetually entrenched in irritability or self-pity often alienate us from feeling or expressing any anger or sadness whatsoever.

We do not have to let other people’s irresponsible emotional expression alienate us from our feelings. While I believe we do not have much choice about what we feel, I know that we have many choices about how we respond to our emotions. *The Tao of Fully Feeling* describes the middle ground between emotional explosiveness and emotional deadness – between miasmic moodiness and desiccated “feeling-less-ness.” It provides pragmatic advice for dealing with painful and potentially disruptive feelings in non-destructive ways.

We can learn to be emotional in benign ways. We can have our emotions without holding onto them. We can soften and relax into our feelings without exiling or enshrining them. We can let our feelings pass through us when they have fully served their function.

There are also times when it behooves us to sublimate or suppress our feelings. Sublimation is the conscious choice to transform and redirect emotional energy into other modes of productive self-expression, such as exercise or dance. Suppression is the conscious choice to refrain from emotional expression in inappropriate circumstances; rarely do we benefit from yelling at the boss or crying in front of insensitive people. At such times we can postpone “emoting” until we are in a safer milieu.

Automatic repression is not the only bad choice that we make regarding our feelings. A damaging choice that most of us continuously make is clasping a positive feeling that we are no longer truly experiencing. When we do this, we replace the authenticity of that feeling with an empty, lifeless idea.

When we force ourselves to display unfelt happiness or love, we appear as artificial and beguiling as plastic flowers or cheap perfume. Forced laughter and strained smiles inspire the same level of trust as do dishonest politicians and “slick” used-car salesmen.

Without the full spectrum of emotions, we are not whole human beings. We are instead like the artist whose palette only has room for light and cheery colors. Our self-expression is boring and superficial like discount store paintings, unconvincingly ethereal in their insipid feathery pastels.

The “negative” emotions add dark colors to an artist’s palette. They open up an infinite range of color, hue, and tone. Without black on the palette there are no rich colors, no depths, no contrasts, no intricacies. Without the dark colors it is impossible to capture the infinitely diverse themes and landscapes of life.

Without our darker emotions, there is little depth and dimensionality in our connection with others. We cannot access the many avenues and subtleties of communication that make friendships rich and enduringly interesting. If we can only be friends when we are happy and “up,” then our friendships are painfully superficial.

Profound loneliness is the terrible price we pay when we only relate to others from a guise or stance of feeling good. Those who are only there for others during the good times are fair-weather friends who are strangers to loyalty and trust.

Most people like themselves when they are feeling love or happiness or serenity, but the person who befriends himself in times of emotional pain possesses a more solid and authentic self-esteem.

When we learn to experience our feelings directly, we eventually discover that surrendering to them is by far the most efficient – and, in the long run, least painful – way of responding to them. We realize firsthand that life does not have to be pain-free to be fully enjoyed. We discover that new encounters with loss and hurt do not dominate our awareness or crush our enthusiasm for being alive.

As we learn to befriend our emotions, we suffer less and less from self-damaging flights from feelings. We gracefully accept the reality that our emotional nature, like the weather, often changes unpredictably with a variety of pleasant and unpleasant conditions. We realize that a positive feeling cannot be induced to persist any more than the sun can be forced to continuously shine.

When we surrender and soften to our feelings, we reconnect with the invaluable instincts and intuition they naturally carry. At times we discover the wonder of all the so-called negative emotions. I see others with restored emotionality having many wonderful experiences of sadness mellowing into solace, of anger unfolding into laughter, of fear flipping into excitement, of jealousy opening up into appreciation, and of blame giving way to forgiveness.

HARVESTING FORGIVENESS OUT OF BLAME

*For it’s true, isn’t it, in our world,
that the petals pooled with nectar,
and the polished thorns are a single thing –
that even the purest light,
lacking the robes of darkness,
would be without expression.*

– Mary Oliver

For most people forgiveness is a process. When you have been deeply wounded, the work of forgiveness can take years. It will go through many stages – grief, rage, sorrow, fear, and confusion . . .

– Jack Kornfield, *A Path with Heart*

I hear a great deal of dangerous and inaccurate “guidance” put out about forgiveness these days – particularly about forgiving parents who were abusive or neglectful. “You must simply choose forgiveness” is a common refrain in many recovery and New Age arenas.

This black-and-white advice about forgiveness seems so irrefutable that many survivors unquestioningly accept it. Many decide to forgive but secretly feel awful about themselves because they never actually feel forgiving. Others think and truly believe they forgive, yet never feel any emotional substance in their forgiveness.

Blind acceptance of the advice to simply choose forgiveness creates a condition of false forgiveness. False forgiveness is psychic thin ice that obscures our underlying reservoirs of angry and hurt feelings about childhood. Unfortunately, this fragile mental construction cannot support an emotionally deep and truly intimate relationship with our parents.

Real forgiveness has all but vanished from Western culture. It has been replaced by an unauthentic ideal of forgiveness that renders us amnesiac about our pain.

For those of us who were seriously hurt in childhood, forgiving feelings toward our parents rarely arise until we have drained our reservoirs of pain by grieving. Since real forgiveness, as we will see, begins with the self, I hope this book will help you understand how unfair it is to blame yourself for not “simply choosing forgiveness.”

GRIEF PRECEDES RELIEF

Death is not the tragedy, but the ten million times we deaden and close our hearts because experience doesn't reflect what we consider acceptable.

– Stephen Levine, *Who Dies*

Time may or may not heal all wounds. It depends on how we use the time. If we deny our sorrow, or run away from it, or hope it will just go away by itself, we will be miserable. But when we face it, and express our sadness in healthy ways, we are transformed by the sorrow itself.

– Hazelden Meditations

Simply-choosing-forgiveness is often an unconscious attempt to keep our sadness and anger about childhood buried in the past. Ironically, this decision also inters our feelings of real forgiveness, as well as our capacity to be fully feeling.

If we are to unearth our whole emotional nature, we must first dig through the layers of old emotional pain that cover it. This excavation typically unearths the corpses of many childhood losses – deaths of essential aspects of ourselves – that we were not allowed to grieve at the time. When we grieve them now, we discover our phoenix-like ability to be fully reborn

out of these losses.

Grieving is unfortunately widely prohibited in our culture. Psychotherapists Jordan and Margaret Paul elaborate on our reluctance to grieve and “to dirty our hands” with our painful feelings:

Our difficulty in dealing constructively with pain begins in childhood. Parents’ efforts to protect children against any harsh reality – conflict in the family, the death of a pet – deprives them of practice in handling pain. When parents don’t allow for open expression of pain, whether it’s minor (such as a disappointment or a failure) or major (such as the loss of a grandparent) children never learn they can experience pain, be deeply affected, and still survive. This is how we learn we have to be, or seem to be, unaffected.

Grieving is, in fact, so taboo in our culture that most of us cannot even cry at the funerals of those whom we most love. Those few who dare to actively lament are encouraged to “get over it” quickly, to stop thinking (feeling!) about their loved ones, to put away photographs of the departed, and above all to keep busy. In *Loss And Change*, Peter Marris’ study of the Anglo-Saxon approach to grieving, he elaborates on this:

Giving way to grief is stigmatized as morbid, unhealthy, demoralizing . . . the proper action of a friend or well-wisher is felt to be distraction of a mourner from his or her grief . . . Mourning is treated as if it were a weakness, a self-indulgence, a reprehensible bad habit instead of a psychological necessity.

If we are not allowed to mourn death, how much more reluctant are we to grieve other significant losses? Until I was thirty, it never would have occurred to me to grieve the death of a job or a relationship. Until recently, almost no one grieved for one of the greatest losses of all – the death of a parent’s goodwill in childhood. Little wonder so many of us carry around tremendous burdens of unreleased grief.

How needlessly we suffer from being deprived of the unique healing relief that comes only through grieving. Grieving, like nothing else, extricates us from our webs of tension and distraction. We can let go of unhealthy allegiances to old family rules that do not allow us to acknowledge the pain of our childhoods. We no longer need to squander our vitality imprisoning our memories and guarding against the escape of our pain.

Many of us are like animals corralled so long that we have not noticed that adulthood has opened the gate to a vast plain of freedom and opportunity. Grieving releases us from confinement in a tiny portion of ourselves and frees us to grow into the confident, life-loving adults we should have been groomed to be. I hope this book unlocks your inborn ability to proudly embrace your grieving process, and that you are subsequently rewarded with the gifts of grieving described in [Chapter 4](#).

HOW CAN I FORGIVE YOU, IF YOU ARE NOT TO BLAME?

Why would my daddy want me to forgive him if he didn't hurt me?

– Maria, an eleven-year-old client

Real forgiveness is most commonly found in the calm eye of the hurricane of blame. This paradox is part of a larger irony that inextricably links the human capacity to feel “good” with the necessity to sometimes feel “bad.”

He who never feels sad cannot know joy. She who is never angry, rarely feels authentic love. Those who perpetually run from their fear never discover their courage. And those who refuse to feel blame never really feel forgiveness. Ken Wilber, a modern sage of transpersonal psychology, states:

In trying to separate the opposites and cling to those we judge positive, such as pleasure without pain, life without death . . . we are really striving after phantoms without the least reality. Might as well strive for a world of crests and no troughs, buyers and no sellers, lefts and no rights, ins and no outs.

As the opposite to forgiveness, blame is widely “pathologized” in spiritual and therapeutic circles. Most experts on forgiveness seem to be oblivious to the differences between healthy and dysfunctional blame.

When we offhandedly banish blame from our awareness, we never discover its tremendous value as an instinct. Blame is a fundamental part of saying no, setting limits, protesting unfairness, and defending our boundaries. We will never feel safe if we cannot make blaming statements like: “Stop it, you’re hurting me!” “Don’t call me names!” and “No, you cannot take that – it belongs to me!” Such reflexive blame is a vital contribution from the feeling nature to the instinct of self-protection.

Dysfunctional parents customarily crush their children’s instinct to blame unfair parenting practices – and by extension all bad behavior – as soon as it appears. In our culture the most extreme consequences are meted out to children who challenge their parents. Most hospital emergency rooms deal daily with the violence parents perpetrate on children who say no or answer back.

Even parents who claim to be philosophically opposed to corporal punishment sometimes reflexively respond to their toddler’s “no” by grabbing their arm, yanking them into the air, and swatting them with full force on the buttocks. Can you imagine how you would feel if someone three times your size suddenly appeared beside you and manhandled you in such a manner?

Many of us are also afraid of our blame because we were traumatically abandoned as children for challenging parental unfairness. Many of us suffered the archetypal punishment of being pushed out a door (sometimes with a packed suitcase) by a parent fuming something like:

Get out of my sight! If you don’t like the way we do things around here, then go and find somewhere else to live!

When children are not allowed to blame their parents' bad behavior, they typically turn their blame against others and/or themselves. When we cannot put our blame where it belongs, we are often unconsciously impelled to blame and hurt someone else. Dr. George R. Bach and Dr. Herb Goldberg describe the consequences of this:

Many of the common forms of displaced aggression such as scapegoating, bullying, prejudice, and cruelty are by-products of aggressive feelings first felt within the family but suppressed. To inflict pain at least proves that I can affect somebody. If I cannot affect or touch anybody, I can at least shock you into some passion through wounds and pain. I shall at least make sure we both feel something . . .

Misplaced blame is scapegoating. Wilhelm Reich brilliantly describes the consequences of misdirected blame in *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*.

There are many fascistic sub-cultures in our society. Almost every minority group (including children) suffers from atrocious acts of scapegoating and prejudice. Reich points out that sub-cultures are fascistic to the degree they demand absolute, unquestioned honoring of their leaders. Similarly, families are fascistic to the degree that parents are autocratic. Parents who can't protest their leaders' misconduct commonly scapegoat their children, and children who can't blame their parents displace their anger onto the socially approved targets of their subculture.

Whether or not we unconsciously act out our blame through scapegoating, most of us unfairly blame ourselves for the deficits we suffer from poor parenting. We scapegoat ourselves rather than consider that our parents might have seriously injured us, especially since complaining about bad parenting is one of our culture's ultimate taboos.

Renowned psychologist Erik Erikson points out that blame becomes shame when it is turned against the self, and many of us suffer unending bouts of toxic shame because our inverted blame continuously generates self-loathing.

Until we understand the degree to which our current pain derives from unresolved childhood losses, we are susceptible to blaming the wrong person(s) for our troubles. [Chapter 7](#) is an approach to blame that does away with the need for scapegoating and witch-hunting, and that allows us to feel and express our blame in ways that do not hurt us, our parents, or innocent bystanders.

If you would like to assess whether you have been poisoned by your own blame, close your eyes and notice your inner experience as you try to remember challenging your parents. Perhaps you don't have any recollections of resisting them. Maybe your complete "humbling" took place before you can even remember. Nonetheless, you may still tense up inside, feel guilty, or even scold yourself at the thought or image of questioning your parents about anything at all.

Or perhaps you remember traumas that occurred when you disagreed with them. If you feel any loss or distress doing this exercise, I hope it will motivate you to more thoroughly explore your relationship to blame.

FORGIVE BUT DO NOT FORGET

*Forgiveness does not in any way justify or condone harmful actions.
While you forgive, you may also say, “Never again will I knowingly
allow this to happen.”*

– Jack Kornfield

Real forgiveness depends on the adult child clearly remembering the specifics of her parents’ abuse and neglect. It is not humanly possible to forgive injuries that are still causing us pain. Unremembered and ungrieved traumas block the tender feelings that are the matrix for feeling forgiveness.

I first began to understand this when I finally realized I would never have the notorious one-day-you’ll-thank-us-for-this experience. While there is much that I do thank my parents for, my gratitude never relates to the times they used that phrase to justify their hurtfulness.

To truly feel grateful to our parents, we must first identify and achieve significant healing of our childhood injuries. Accordingly, I hope you will distinguish between those parenting practices that merit gratitude, and those that need to be repudiated. When we authentically forgive our parents, we know what we are forgiving them for, and what specifically was blameworthy about their behavior in the first place.

If we do not recognize the exact nature of our parents’ transgressions, we risk tolerating similar kinds of hurtfulness in the present. Children who are not allowed to blame their parents’ bad behavior often become adults who do not protect themselves from abuse.

There are many perpetrators who seem to have a sixth sense for identifying people who have lost the ability to protest and blame unfairness. If we do not register a “negative” feeling response to hurtfulness, we cannot tell that we are being abused. Instead we tacitly “forgive” our abusers just as we were forced to tacitly forgive our parents, no matter how much ongoing abuse they dish out. This is why psychoanalyst Judith Viorst says:

Until we can mourn the past . . . we are doomed to repeat it.

When we effectively grieve our childhood losses, old unexpressed feelings of blame naturally resurface. There is usually little or no need to express these feelings directly to our parents unless, of course, they are still actively abusive. Feelings of blame can be expressed in safe and nonabusive ways without our parents being present. In my own personal recovery work and in my private practice, I have seen this expression miraculously generate openings into real feelings of forgiveness on many occasions. When this wonderful transformation occurs:

Pain without memory is replaced by memory without pain.

– Anne Hart

Finally, some parents were so cruel that forgiveness may not be an option. Nonetheless, it

is still important to uncover and express blame about their perversity because unexpressed blame commonly blocks all our feelings of forgiveness – self-forgiveness as well as the forgiveness of significant others.

THE REWARDS OF EMOTIONAL RECOVERY

Sparrow, your message is clear: it is not too late for the singing.

– Tess Gallagher

Many of us become anxious when we first contemplate the idea of emotional recovery. Learning to feel is sometimes as disconcerting as mastering an artificial limb. Yet even though mastery of a prosthesis causes considerable discomfort at first, few would forego a difficult adjustment period to reacquire the mobility afforded by such a device. Adapting to feelings may seem similarly aggravating at first, yet I believe the benefits of restored feeling are even greater than a prosthesis' restoration of the ability to walk, dance, and drive.

As we become more emotionally whole, our health and vitality naturally improve. When we disburden ourselves of old unresolved traumas, energy wasted holding the past at bay becomes available for celebrating daily life.

Restored feeling enlivens our sensation, cleanses the filters of our perception, and refurbishes our aesthetic appreciation. This naturally invites us to slacken our pace and relax into our innate ability to be daunted by beauty. Mary Oliver captures this possibility in her exquisite piece, *Morning Poem*.

*Every morning
the world
is created.
Under the orange*

*sticks of the sun
the heaped
ashes of the night
turn into leaves again
and fasten themselves to the high branches –
and the ponds appear
like black cloth
on which are painted islands*

*of summer lilies.
If it is your nature . . .
you will swim away along the soft trails
for hours, your imagination*

*alighting everywhere.
And if your spirit
carries within it*

*the thorn
that is heavier than lead –
if it's all you can do
to keep on trudging –*

*there is still
somewhere deep within you
a beast shouting that the earth
is exactly what it wanted –*

*each pond with its blazing lilies
is a prayer heard and answered
lavishly, every morning,
whether or not . . .
you have ever dared to pray.*

Fully feeling people are also rewarded with increasing richness in their relationships – both with themselves and with others. Love manifests as a palpable warmth and excitement when it is grounded in the heart and body by feeling. Emotional love is so much more profound than the lightweight intellectual experiences of thought-bound people for whom love is often only an ideal, a dream, or a hungry expectation.

Adult children benefit greatly from challenging and overthrowing false, destructive beliefs about forgiveness, blame, and emotionality. Life is inordinately more painful than necessary when we hate, shame, and abandon ourselves for not feeling “good.” If we remain trapped in our families’ legacy of disdaining all but the most exalted emotions, we may never feel authentically forgiving toward ourselves or anyone else.

2

FORGIVENESS AS DENIAL

The habit of not-seeing, and lying about life, has been attached like a limpet to the American soul.

– Robert Bly

One can get in the habit of not thinking as a defense, of not perceiving and not considering what are his perceptions and feelings about life, in order to avoid what is painful.

– Elvin Semrad

Many of us are pressured to choose a premature and empty form of forgiveness with guilt-inducing statements like: “When are you going to stop crying about your childhood?” “Don’t you think it’s time to let your parents off the hook?” “Why don’t you let the past be the past and just get on with the business of living?” “Do you know what your problem is? You’re just not very forgiving.”

This kind of toxic goading is often hard to resist. The concept of forgiveness is frequently held out as a miraculous tool of recovery. Forgiveness is often prescribed as the panacea for all our problems, especially those around love and intimacy. If only we would decide to forgive, if only we would choose forgiveness, then we would be freed from the pain of loneliness and separation.

Survivors are particularly susceptible to this injurious advice when they first begin to feel their healthy anger about the past. Instead of experiencing their anger as validation of how poorly they were parented, they often short-circuit their recovery by turning it mercilessly against themselves:

What’s wrong with me? Why can’t I forgive? If there wasn’t something really wrong with me, I would have forgiven my parents by now. I really am bad. No wonder no one loves me! No wonder my

life's such a mess. I've decided to forgive. I think I forgive. My intention is to choose forgiveness . . . but I'm still lonely! I guess I never do anything right. I can't even forgive!

When we choose forgiveness by swallowing our anger about parental injustice, we slip into the psychic fog of denial. Denial is a broad term used by “recovery therapists” to describe the various defenses we use to numb ourselves to ongoing and unchallengeable hurtfulness.

(I am using the term denial here somewhat differently than the way it is used in the drug and alcohol recovery movement. There, denial often implies a shameful, blameworthy conscious process used by substance abusers to ignore the blatantly destructive effects of their addictions.)

Denial is a psychic survival mechanism that arises unconsciously and automatically in continuously abused and neglected children. Children need to idealize at least one parent to maintain their enthusiasm for life. Denial allows them to maintain the illusion of being loved regardless of how untrue that is. So great is this need that they automatically banish from their awareness all manner of parental disregard, injustice, and hostility – especially in the idealized parent.

Denial protects abused children from the overwhelming, undigestible reality that their parents are not their allies. This is why grief expert Steven Levine poses the following question:

How often are we like the battered child on the front page of the *Los Angeles Times*, being carried gently from the room by the compassionate matron, who reaches out over the matron's shoulder shouting, “Mama, Mama,” to the woman in custody between the policemen on the other side of the room, arrested for burning the flesh and breaking the bones of this child?

Many of us relied on denial to save our sanity and sometimes our lives in childhood. We were too fragile and dependent to feel the overwhelming pain and disappointment we experienced at the hands of our parents. For many of us gross unfairness was daily and ongoing, endless and impossible to challenge or change. With no foreseeable relief and no one to whom we could appeal for protection, what choice did we have but to go numb?

Denial is truly a matter of life and death for some children. Those who cannot numb themselves and discount their perceptions of protracted parental viciousness are susceptible to mental illness, early drug abuse, and suicide. Some are prone to fatal “accidents,” and some develop a death wish that destroys their ability to fight off illness. (Some children, of course, may come to tragic ends for reasons other than dysfunctional parenting.)

Survivors who are still in denial about the dysfunctionality of their families should not be blamed or shamed. The blinders of denial had to be used for many years. Many of us have become habituated to them, and I know many survivors of savage abuse who honestly believe their parents took good care of them. How much harder then is it for those who “only” suffered emotional neglect to understand how seriously they were deprived?

Denial is often even harder to dissolve than it is to recognize. We are understandably reluctant to look beyond our denial into the pain it masks because we were humiliated for

revealing our hurt in childhood. How can we believe that it is safe to express our painful feelings now, when all around us, in real life and on television, we see others being ridiculed for emotional expressiveness?

All too many of us have been wounded by variations of the threat “Stop crying, or I’ll really give you something to cry about.” The fact that many of us mimic this abusive statement as if it is an amusing cliché accentuates the pervasiveness of our denial.

When we do not challenge denial, we remain numbly imprisoned in old pain, blindly indifferent to the wounds and losses of our childhood. Mesmerized by the outmoded illusion that we had a happy childhood, we live our lives halfheartedly in an emotionally anesthetized condition. As distinguished childhood expert Bruno Bettelheim states:

Many childhood experiences have become, of necessity, deeply buried in the unconscious during the process of developing one’s adult personality. This separation or distancing from one’s childhood is no longer needed when the adult personality is fully and securely formed, but by then, the distancing has for most people become a part of that very personality. Separation from one’s childhood is temporarily necessary, but if it is permanently maintained it deprives us of inner experiences which, when restored to us, can keep us young in spirit and also permit greater closeness to our children.

Fortunately, we no longer require the service of denial. We are no longer dependent on our parents. They cannot punish us for acknowledging and expressing our painful feelings about the past.

It is time to challenge our denial. It is time to remove the cognitive straitjacket of false forgiveness that restricts our emotional circulation. We must grieve to extricate ourselves from the swamp of anxiety and depression that seeps up from our unresolved, unconscious pain.

The freedom to set sail into the wondrous ocean of unencumbered adulthood is ours when we fully remember, grieve, and work through the suffering our parents caused us. Perhaps we can take inspiration from renowned psychoanalyst Alice Miller:

It is like a miracle each time to see how much individuality has survived behind such denial and self-alienation, and can reappear as the work of mourning brings freedom . . .

DENIAL MASKS SELF-ABUSE

Whatever is denied conscious access continues to influence the individual anyhow – but via unconscious processes.

– Carl Jung

Experience has taught us that we have only one enduring weapon in our struggle against mental illness: the emotional discovery and emotional acceptance of the truth in the individual and unique history of our childhood.

– Alice Miller

If we do not awaken from denial, we may never realize that we frequently treat ourselves as harshly as did our parents. Children learn by imitation, and adult children of dysfunctional families undergo much unnecessary suffering from learned self-abuse and neglect.

I caught myself in learned self-abuse for the umpteenth time earlier this month. It was a Saturday afternoon and I was in a very relaxed mood preparing my lunch as I listened to my favorite music. I was luxuriating in the smells and textures of the spices I had just cut up and ground when I started to trim the fat off of a small piece of steak.

Suddenly I noticed my leisurely pace becoming greatly accelerated. Much to my dismay, I realized I was tearing around the kitchen like a chef who might be fired for being tardy with the boss's dinner.

Fortunately I had learned enough from my recovery work to stop and focus inward to discern what was going on. I immediately noticed that I felt highly anxious, impatient, and irritable and that my stomach was contracted in a huge knot. The music had faded almost inaudibly into the background, my appetite had vanished, and I could barely wait to finish cooking my meal. All at once a list of unimportant tasks seemed to be screaming like a “tantruming” baby for my immediate attention.

As I tuned in further to my inner experience, I noticed that my inner self-talk was terribly hostile. Suddenly it dawned on me that the act of trimming off the fat had triggered in me an emotional flashback (see [Chapter 4](#)). Under the influence of this flashback, I was reexperiencing the awful fear of my father angrily “going off” at me at the dinner table.

Further scrutiny let me see that I had joined forces with him and was stuck in an internal storm of berating myself. I was barking at myself with the litany of criticisms he assaulted me with at almost every family meal. Barely on the threshold of awareness, I recoiled at the echo of a diatribe I had heard so often from him:

Who the hell do you think you are being so fussy? You'll eat that fat or I'll make you eat it. You always have to be so different. Why can't you be like everyone else? If you don't stop messing with that meat, I'll knock the living daylights out of you.

Even worse than this reiteration of his bullying speech, was the terrible fear and anxiety retriggered by these words. In a matter of seconds, the harmless violation of an unfair childhood rule – one that had no external source of enforcement for over thirty years – moved me from enjoying myself to hating myself so thoroughly that I couldn't get away from me fast enough.

Fortunately, I was able to challenge this process because of the recovery work I have done regarding this issue (see [Chapter 7](#)). I reversed it by angrily renouncing my father's ludicrous rule about meat fat, and by moving into affirming, positive self-talk. As my anger brought this

learned self-abuse to a halt, I felt a great wave of grief come up in me for the myriad times I hurt myself by parroting his memorized condemnations.

How many thousands of times before had I unconsciously slipped into “self-destruct mode?” How many times had my relaxed enjoyment of a task been instantly ruptured by me repeating parental judgments that I wasn’t doing it right? How many tasks had I dared not attempt because I accepted their reverberating jibes that I was “good for nothing?”

No wonder I used to suffer so much from performance anxiety. No wonder I could never find a moment’s peace. I was dogged by the mental and emotional pain of this incessant self-abuse. My simplest thoughts and actions were constantly subjected to this cruel reincarnation of their harsh disapproval. Denial about my parents’ abusiveness kept me blind to how their criticism had taken up its own life and momentum in me. Denial left me powerless to repudiate this poisonous indoctrination against myself.

I am inexpressibly grateful that working through my denial has led me to understand this dynamic. How blissfully relieved I was to be able to renounce this unwelcome intrusion from the past, to release its accompanying fear through grieving, and to get back to leisurely completing my meal. Had I not known how to deal with this nasty intrusion from the past, I probably would have rushed anxiously through my meal so that I could hurl myself into distracting activity for the rest of the day, as I had done so many times in the past.

I believe many survivors are driven out of alignment with themselves by these types of emotional flashbacks and their byproducts of abusive self-talk. When we confront our denial and identify the details of how we were intimidated and controlled, we can begin to break the habit of mimicking our parents’ contempt.

PREMATURE FORGIVENESS AND GUILT

Premature forgiveness is the decision to forgive our parents before we have thoroughly grasped the extent to which they harmed us. This decision generally brings progress in recovery to a screeching halt as it blocks the memory retrieval we need to set specific goals for our recovery. Premature forgiveness is false forgiveness because it is unsubstantiated by the recovery work that must take place for forgiveness to be emotionally genuine.

False forgiveness strands us in the belief that our poor self-image and inhibited self-expression are innate defects of character rather than products of poor parenting. It forces us to trivialize the pain of these conditions – to perpetually reside in unresolved childhood misery and poor self-esteem.

Premature forgiveness is commonly a knee-jerk reaction to the intense guilt that arises when we first challenge our denial about the past. Most of us were taught to believe that only the worst ingrates would question their parents’ child-rearing performance.

Many survivors from dysfunctional Jewish and Christian families were also brainwashed to believe that complaining about our parents is a sin – that it is a violation of the “sacred” fourth commandment: “Honor thy father and mother.” I was told over and over by the nuns that there was a special place in hell for those who had “bad” thoughts or feelings about their parents.

Many adult children become very anxious when they first begin to speak the unidealized truth about their parents. A mere inference that our parents were derelict in their duty to us can

make us feel as if we are about to be annihilated by “the wrath of God.”

I believe the fourth commandment has been handed down to us in a very repressive, all-or-none way. It is a travesty of Judeo-Christian mores that the commandment to honor one’s father and mother is so commonly distorted into an unprotesting acceptance of unacceptable behavior. It is as if the commandment really says: “Honor thy father and mother no matter how they hurt you.”

I wince inside at the image of the many survivors, who out of blind allegiance to this commandment, leave their children in the “care” of grandparents who are still abusive. I have met a number of survivors who are so numbed by denial that they leave their children alone with the same parent who molested them in childhood. I believe the fourth commandment should be retranslated as “Honor thy father and mother if they honor you.”

PREMATURE FORGIVENESS AND THE LOSS OF BASIC HUMAN RIGHTS

So self-contradictory, indeed, has love become that some of those studying family life have concluded that “love” is simply the name of the way more powerful members of the family control other members. Love, Ronald Laing maintains, is often a cover for violence.

– Rollo May, *Love and Will*

Premature forgiveness silences the inner child in much the same way that biological parents silence the real child. Many of us continue to forbid our inner children, and by extension ourselves, our most basic rights and needs. We routinely shame and hate our inner children whenever they complain, feel, “emote”, or need anything but the bare necessities. Premature forgiveness preserves the ongoing retraumatization and abandonment of our inner child.

The Human Bill of Rights of Self-Expression in [Appendix B](#) identifies rights that are commonly denied to children and held exclusively by parents. Much of the trauma of childhood occurred when we were punished for our instinctive attempts to exercise these rights. Many of us still suffer unnecessarily from abdicating such basic rights as the right to say no, the right to be treated with respect, and the right to have our own feelings, opinions, and preferences. Our health and future growth depends on us claiming and exercising these rights.

Adult children can use the Bill of Rights as goals and guidelines for their efforts at recovery. To successfully accomplish this, we must stop mimicking the “forgiven” parental criticisms that throttle our healthy self-interest whenever it arises.

You might take a moment now to assess whether you still hold yourself in check with memorized parental censoring. Have you heard any of the following prohibitions echoing in your mind recently? “How dare you say no to him?” “Don’t be so selfish!” “Stop feeling sorry for yourself – you’re so emotional!” “Who cares what you want. There are other people besides you, you know!” “Just be glad for what you have – think of someone else for a change!” “Stop chattering away like that – what makes you think anyone cares about what you have to say?”

If any part of you winces or contracts at any of these phrases, you might invoke some healthy indignation about having been turned against yourself in this way. You can use the energy of your just anger to empower your efforts to acquire the basic human rights these

statements unfairly violate.

Premature forgiveness does not always spring merely from denial, fear or guilt. This false form of forgiveness may also be motivated by the normal desire to get over being hurt and to be in loving relationship with family. As adults, we still have much of the child's need to perceive ourselves as loved. The decision to forgive can therefore spring from the desire to get the past over with so that we can feel comfortable with our parents. We can all too easily invoke false forgiveness because most of us are well-practiced at ignoring our unhealed childhood wounds to keep the illusion of a loving family intact.

Unfortunately, premature forgiveness strands us in relationships with our parents that are as devoid of genuine warmth and intimacy as ever. Unless we work through the unresolved fear and hurt our parents caused us, we will always be uneasy around them and hold them at an emotional distance. This is commonly the case even when they have outgrown their abusive ways.

FALSE FORGIVENESS AND PERFECTIONISM

Thou shalt not should thyself.

– Herbie Monroe

Experiencing one's own inadequacies and still going on in spite of them are two of the greatest achievements of adulthood. Success in many ways, is not as important as failure and how you handle it.

– Robert Hand

Perfectionism is the self-destructive process of evaluating ourselves with godlike standards. Oliver Wendell Holmes warned against this when he said: "Young man, the secret of my success is that at an early age I discovered I was not God."

The unreachable standards of perfectionism make us cruelly and unhelpfully self-critical. Perpetual happiness and unfaltering peak performance are widespread perfectionistic expectations that torture most Americans. Those of us who are encumbered with these two insidious values are likely to judge all other states of being and performance as shamefully inadequate.

Perfectionism is rife in industrial societies. It is woven into the fabric of American life as thoroughly as the mystique of baseball and apple pie. I recently viewed a television program in which third graders were asked to fill in the missing endings of various proverbs. Although the audience howled in laughter, some looked as shocked as I felt when the child presented with "If you don't at first succeed . . ." replied in total earnestness "you will be a loser and burden on society forever."

Perfectionism was probably born on the assembly line, where workers are forced to be as emotionless, efficient, need-less, and trouble-free as the machines they tend. Industrial societies, via the training ground of the family, create perfectionistic, soul-destroying expectations in almost everyone.

Perfectionism arises automatically in children subjected to excessive criticism and punishment. Hoping to eliminate their parents' apparent reasons for being so displeased, they strive to achieve the impossible goal of becoming mistake-free. Out of fear of their parents' disapproval, they vilify themselves for even the most minor miscues. Many, out of fear of being a nuisance, eventually conclude that many of their normal needs are flaws that must be eliminated.

Perfectionism can also manifest spontaneously in a child as a response to neglect. Perfectionism is often the child's desperate attempt to win parental love. If only he could faultlessly excel and be perfectly self-sufficient, and if only he never needed new clothes and never spilt his milk, and if only he didn't get sick and could stay out of mom's way, then maybe his parents would act lovingly to him. And if only her nose were a little smaller, and if only she were more like that perfect little girl on TV, and if only she could remember to keep that smile permanently plastered on her face, then, maybe then, her parents would love her.

I can remember obtaining near-perfect scores on almost every test in elementary school and still not getting a single word of praise from my father. Eventually, ninety-nines disappointed me, and I became workaholically fixated on getting the perfect scores I hoped would get my father's desperately longed-for approval.

Over time I focused so obsessively on my mistakes that I became over-identified with them until, in my own eyes, I was nothing but an ugly mishmash of mistakes. As John Bradshaw points out, dysfunctional parents respond to their children's miscues as if the children themselves are mistakes. Some even venomously rebuke their children by telling them that their being born was a mistake, and that they are a disgrace to the family name.

Many parents use their children's innocent mistakes and harmless flaws as an excuse to scapegoat them. They regularly vent their unhappiness and frustration on their children and then blame them for their own incapacity to love: "Who could love a child like that?" Some blame their children for everything that goes wrong in their lives: "I've given up my life for you. Is this how you repay me?!" "It's a crying shame! You children have absolutely ruined my life. You are sending me to an early grave!" "If I hadn't had you, I could have _____ (fill in the blank)."

It is easy for parents to convince their offspring that they should be punished for not being perfect. Parents are virtual gods to their children, with absolute power over them. They can thoroughly brainwash their children into believing that even the cruelest punishment is "for their own good." Alice Miller has written a potent description of this process in her denial-shattering book, *For Your Own Good*.

Many dysfunctional families are like mini-cults. The parents inculcate the children with their beliefs and values when they are completely impressionable. Thereafter they harshly punish any deviation in thinking or behaving.

Many adult children are so indoctrinated in their cult's way of thinking and behaving that they never break free and claim their own unique individuality. Although they may move out of the family compound, they maintain a lifelong allegiance to their cult no matter how hostile its leaders are to their well-being. Over and over, I see adult children in protracted subservience to parents who treat them with abject disrespect – who revile them in ways that they would not tolerate for a moment from anyone else.

One of my greatest pet peeves is the archetypal movie scene in which the hero pompously responds to a question about his decision or choice with: "Because my father did it that way, that's why!" Invariably this trenchantly clinches his case and all the other characters defer in

obvious respect. I hope that someday someone will make a movie with a new denouement for this scene. If I was directing it I would instruct a central character to rebut this blind obedience with something like: “If your father ate cowpie sandwiches, would we have to eat them too?”

DENIAL ABOUT PERFECTIONISM

The power of a man’s virtue should not be measured by his special efforts, but by his ordinary doing.

– Blaise Pascal

There is probably not an adult child alive, gorgeous or grotesque, who has not died a thousand deaths in perfectionistic encounters with the mirror.

– Herbie Monroe

Adult children who prematurely forgive their parents may never discover that they were bullied into perfectionism. Unrealistic values and unattainable goals may needle them incessantly turning their psyches into an internal bed of nails.

When we are heavily afflicted by perfectionism, we are so terrified of making mistakes that we never attempt anything new. We forget that life is replete with exciting opportunities. Our wonderful gift of free will is reduced to selecting different ways of picking on ourselves. A tiny pimple, relentlessly picked, becomes a large infected wound.

Perfectionism turns some of us into constipated grammarians. We become tentative about everything we say. Often we guard against our thoughts lest they be “improper.” At our worst, we even become guilty and penitent about our dreams.

I was once the type of smug, self-identified perfectionist who paid a great deal of lip service to challenging this destructive habit. I customarily minimized the emasculating effects that perfectionism had on my life. I coyly labeled myself “perfectionist,” but I usually displayed a sly grin that clearly said I was secretly proud of this dysfunction. When I think about it now, I was somewhat like the person who wears the T-shirt:

I don’t have a drinking problem.

I drink.

I pass out.

I fall down.

No problem!

If I had worn a commensurate version of this T-shirt, it would have read:

I don’t have a perfectionism problem.

I strive to be perfect.
I drive myself relentlessly.
I fall into self-loathing.
No problem!

PERFECTIONISM KILLS SELF-ESTEEM AS PHONINESS KILLS LOVE

We have become our mothers or our fathers or the fantasy of what the good little child is or what the bad little child is. Sometimes we hide ourselves so well that eventually even we no longer recognize our own disguises.

– Susanne Short

*We can secure other people's approval, if we do right and try hard;
but our own is worth a hundred of it . . .*

– Mark Twain

Children of dysfunctional families are commonly born into terrible loneliness. Children who are supposed to be “seen and not heard” cannot help but suffer from overwhelming feelings of alienation and rejection. Many survivors who were silenced by the “no talk” rule in childhood continue to suffer the same kind of mute loneliness in adulthood. They have yet to learn that real connection and belonging comes from people talking uninhibitedly together.

Perfectionism intensifies the silencing, isolating effect of the no-talk rule. Many of us are unable to express anything about ourselves that is not 110% shiny. We are so afraid of being seen as less than perfect that there is little that we feel safe to share.

Until I was almost thirty my conversation seldom included anything but joke-telling and sports-talk. This superficiality made me feel perpetually lonely, even though I was popular whenever I stayed anywhere long enough to make acquaintances.

I was laconic because my family life convinced me it was unwise to talk about the vulnerable subjects that allow intimacy to grow between people. Talk about feelings, needs, weaknesses, or disappointments was routinely ridiculed in my house. So too was talk about hopes, dreams, and accomplishments.

Dysfunctional parents customarily attack and belittle their children's natural inclination to be enthusiastically self-expressive. One of my parents' implicit rules was that I was not allowed to express the slightest hint of pride in myself. At the same time, one of their favorite deprecations was: “Don't you have any pride in yourself?” This kind of double bind is very typical of the dysfunctional family – damned if you do, damned if you don't.

Whenever I forgot my parents' unstated rule and intimated that I might have said or done something worthwhile, I was belittled. “Get off your high horse, or I'll knock you off” was a common refrain of my childhood. This was particularly true when I expressed a personal opinion. My mother was fond of scornfully greeting my views with phrases like: “Shhhh! Everybody listen to Mr. High and Mighty,” or “You're entitled to your own opinion . . . even if it

stinks,” or “Your taste is all in your mouth.”

Only when we fully express ourselves can we know that we are truly appreciated by others. Only through full self-disclosure can we discover that we are lovable in all aspects of ourselves. Much loneliness is healed through open and uncensored communication. To the extent that I can share my experience with you, to that extent do I feel received and loved by you. Self-expression and self-esteem are interdependent. The intimacy born out of honest sharing makes us feel good about ourselves and in turn encourages us to be increasingly forthright. In the words of Merle Shain:

Friends are people who help you be more yourself, more the person
you are intended to be.

Parents who encourage their children’s talkativeness nurture their self-esteem. Parents who belittle their children into taciturnity supplant their self-esteem with perfectionism.

Self-esteem cannot be reclaimed while perfectionism prevails. Self-esteem is in many ways the opposite of perfectionism. Real self-esteem does not dissolve because of a blemish, a dropped dish, or a dateless Saturday night. Real self-esteem does not instantly evaporate when we feel sad, mad, bad or lonely.

Our self-esteem is as solid as our ability to accept and respect ourselves in all circumstances: health and sickness, success and failure, togetherness and solitude, happiness and sorrow, enthusiasm and depression. As Oscar Wilde said:

It is not the perfect, but the imperfect that is in need of our love.

When perfectionism keeps us from communicating about our troubles, we never learn the liberating secret that everyone has their fair, or unfair, share of pain. We are never soothed by the healing compassion that spontaneously arises between people who commiserate. Commiseration is the age-old human process, barely extant in our culture, of resolving our hurts and frustrations through talking about them. Commiseration adds depth and juice to intimacy in a way that nothing else can.

Our need for our own and others’ love and support is greatest when we are in pain and struggling with our limitations. How sad and unnecessary that many of us still hide in the isolation of our rooms when we are hurting – as loveless and uncared for as we were in our family homes. When we do, it is as if our parents are once again lacerating our self-esteem by banishing us from their presence until we “wipe that look off our faces.”

All babies are born with a full capacity for self-esteem. Self-esteem grows and unfolds throughout their lives when their expressiveness is welcomed. I have seen this over and over in non-industrialized countries. Children’s speech is routinely welcomed in these cultures, and they typically mature into adults who are confident, warm, emotionally whole, and fully self-expressive. The self-esteem of the average member of these cultures is dramatically greater than that of ours.

Until we learn to love ourselves during the less-than-perfect times, our love for others is

superficial and over-conditional. States of being that we hate in ourselves are hard to accept in others.

Perfectionism further alienates us from others by making us either overtly self-critical or conspicuously tight-lipped about our troubles. Both behaviors broadcast an implicit warning to others that they should be careful about what they disclose to us.

And even if we pretend (to ourselves or others) that we are nonjudgmental, unrenounced perfectionistic standards typically make us feel distanced, guarded, and unsafe in company. Perfectionism causes us endless painful fantasies that others find us as wanting as we do, and deprive us of the irreplaceable pleasure of fully being ourselves in company.

Perfectionism also prevents us from letting in the love of others, no matter how abundant and genuine it is. When we are preoccupied with our deficiencies, we are often untouched by the nurturance others offer us. How tragic that so many of us are convinced we only deserve to be loved when we are happy or excelling. Perhaps this verse from the poet Mary Oliver will encourage us to renounce our perfectionism.

*You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees for a hundred miles through
the desert, repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body love what it loves . .*

Let that love be your self. Self-love is a natural, healthy human condition that does not have to deteriorate into the overcompensation of egotism.

Let us exchange self-rejection for the rejection of the perfectionism that was foisted on us when we were too young to ward it off. Nobody can be happy and at their peak all of the time. All good things come and go. Change is the only absolute in life as the mystic poet Ghalib knew:

*The road of change is before you always: the only line stitching this
world's scattered parts.*

As appealing and irrefutable as it may sound on first hearing, “Be all you can be” is an onerous philosophy when “all” means only the best and the most. Be all you can be is an insidious snare that traps us in workaholism and merciless perfectionism. Psychoanalyst Theodore Rubin elaborates on this:

We must guard zealously against the need for “highs” and must be very wary of success for its own naked sake. Addiction to success inevitably leads to profound self-hate and depression. Like any addiction, success too often becomes an inner demand on self for “what have you done lately,” as each success becomes a coercion for still more successes.

Wo/man was not created to become the ultimate machine. We owe it to ourselves to resist the pressure to become super-productive, maintenance-less androids. There are many worthwhile levels of performance that are less than “be all you can be”. One of the most exalted of these is the delightful, low-key, relaxed state of just being. Perhaps the following passage will help us “just say no” to the drug of unnecessary hustle and bustle:

Every day is replete with opportunities to give to myself. Every bit of time “wasted” is a chance to throw off the hegemony of modernity’s be-all and end-all productivity. Every project that takes too long, every task that takes more effort than planned, every job that’s slowed by mistakes, is a wondrous opportunity to practice patience and self-forgiveness.

THERE IS NO PERFECT MR./MS. RIGHT

Well-adjusted has come to mean unaffected.

– Theodore Rubin

If you’re never scared or embarrassed or hurt, it means you never take any chances.

– Julia Soul

Real friends are those who, when you’ve made a fool of yourself, don’t feel that you’ve done a permanent job.

– Erwin T. Randall

Perfectionism frequently produces a never-ending, fruitless search for Mr. or Ms. Perfect. It tends to rise up with great force in the early stages of romantic love. Survivors who have not renounced perfectionism typically over-censor their expressiveness when they first fall in love. They strive to project impeccable images to each other out of fear that anything less will lead to a repetition of earlier abandonments. “Making a good impression” often means hiding many vital parts of oneself.

Self-censorship is an exhausting task. Sooner or later flaws emerge out of the romantic haze. When this happens to two people who have only seen each others’ unblemished masks over a long period, the disillusionment can be devastating. False love, based on mirages of perfection, often dissolves suddenly and dramatically. If this happens enough times, we may give up entirely on love.

Some survivors are so hamstrung by perfectionism that they never look for love at all. Because they don’t see the “ideal” features of an actor or model when they look in the mirror, they are sure they will be rejected if they approach someone to whom they are attracted.

For most of my adolescence I was terrified at the thought of interacting with the girls in

my school. Whenever I saw a girl from my class approaching me from a distance, I quickly turned and circled the block in the other direction rather than face her in a meeting I was sure would be humiliating. My self-worth and self-expression had been so decimated in my family that I “knew” I would only make a fool of myself. I unconsciously feared that anything I might say to engage or impress her would be greeted with the same kind of sarcasm it received at home. It was as if my subconscious rewrote the song “Only fools fall in love” as “Only fools open their mouths.”

It was a very grace-full day in my late twenties when I finally opened to my grief and discovered that my sense of loneliness had shifted very little since I escaped my desolate home. I still felt as basically lonely as I had in adolescence. Even though I finally had a girlfriend and the apparent approval of everyone in my immediate circle, I experienced little ease with anyone. I still habitually retreated to the cloister of my room whenever I had a feeling that was too overwhelming to hide behind my confident facade.

In a life-altering moment of realization, I decided that if this was all my Mr. Perfect act could get me, I might as well stop pretending. As expeditiously as I could, I jettisoned my unrewarding song-and-dance and set my intention to become more authentic. As I feared, many of my old friends slipped away; but beyond my greatest hope, a few friends remained and enthusiastically welcomed my new authenticity. Before long, I felt cared for for the first time in my life.

As I become ever more comfortable with authenticity, my sense of belonging and being at home in my community and the world increases. With twenty years of practice, I am now convinced that nothing actualizes love and appreciation more potently than mutual unrestricted self-revelation. I would trade a roomful of fair-weather friends for one of my intimates with whom I now have this precious communion.

WHIMSICAL MUSINGS ON PERFECTIONISM

I'll figure out as best I can what I ought not do – and then do it: that way, I can make a good case for the times I got lost on the way; if I don't make mistakes who'll have faith in my errors? If I live like a savant no one will be greatly impressed.

Well, I'll try to change for the better: greet them all circumspectly, watch out for appearances, be dedicated, enthusiastic – til I'm just what they ordered, being and un-being at will til I'm totally otherwise.

Then if they let me alone, I'll change my whole person, disagree with my skin, get a new mouth, change my shoes and my eyes – then when I'm different and nobody can recognize me – since anything else is unthinkable – I'll go on as I was in the beginning.

– Pablo Neruda, from *Parthenogenesis*

IDIOT SAVANTS OF THE EMOTIONAL KIND

“Take it away at once,” stormed the Princess, stamping her tiny foot in its embroidered slipper, “I hate real flowers; their petals fall off and they die.”

– Hans Christian Andersen

Many of us have poignant feeling of sympathy for the idiot savant (see Dustin Hoffman in the movie Rainman) and his astounding but pathetic brilliance in one narrow area of mental intelligence. I believe that at such moments we are sometimes vicariously empathizing for ourselves and our parallel impoverishment in a narrow aspect of emotional being. After all, being happy is the one emotional response that is universally valued in our culture, and its importance is so prized that we are guaranteed a right to pursue it in our constitution. And by God we pursue it, stalking happiness with great fury and ruthless abandon, often exterminating any other emotion that threatens to succeed its dominance in our immediate experience.

Recognition for the idiot savant rests almost exclusively on his perfect mastery of numbers, just as self-esteem for the average American depends heavily on his ability to appear and act perfectly happy. For many of us being happy has come to mean feeling good, which in turn means refusing to feel bad. Society provides those of us who are desperate to feel happy and good with innumerable substances and activities to right any faltering in our illusion of perfect well-being.

Many people sacrifice vital aspects of their lives and seriously injure themselves in the pursuit of happiness. Some sacrifice every tomorrow's well-being to a certain hangover by bingeing on food, drugs or alcohol in order to feel good the night before. Some pawn their financial security to the momentary exhilaration of impulse buying in exchange for constant anxiety about unpayable debts. Others risk destroying the love they have with their mates for a fast fix of good feeling in an affair.

In our society, perfectionism manifests on the emotional plane as perpetually displaying preferred feelings. If we are to reclaim our healthy fully feeling human nature, we must renounce our unholy allegiance to the belief that mental health means being happy all the time. We must take that dangerous little yellow button with the simplistic smile off our lapels, and avoid people who try to “fix” our moods with the trite advice of the saccharine pop tune “Don’t worry, be happy!”

As my perfectionism wanes and becomes “a mere shadow of its former self,” I sometimes reverberate delightfully with this poem from Kabir:

*The blue sky opens further and further
And the daily sense of failure goes away;
The damage I have done to myself fades;
A million suns come forward with light*

A galaxy of richness awaits those who rescue themselves from the emotional bankruptcy of being fixated on a singular band of the emotional spectrum. Luxuriating in the full emotional spectrum of human feeling is the theme of the next chapter.

3

THE TAO OF FULLY FEELING

The life of the body is feeling: feeling alive, vibrant, good, excited, angry, sad, joyous and finally contented. It is the lack of feeling, or confusion about feelings, that brings people to therapy.

– Alexander Lowen

This book is not meant to be a definitive treatise on the emotional nature, especially as feeling is often beyond the comprehension of thinking. In fact Freud's stellar pupil Carl Jung theorized that the feeling, emotional part of our psyches is opposite in nature to the thinking, logical part. The poet Antonio Machado expressed a similar view:

*In our souls everything
moves guided by a mysterious hand.
We know nothing of our souls that is understandable . . .*

Language never fully renders emotional experience. And English is particularly deficient in words that capture the subtleties of emotional experience. There are, for instance, many different kinds of tears: tears of loss, relief, physical pain, compassion, joy, pride, gratitude, and aesthetic awe. Similarly, there are different kinds of laughter: the roar of joy, the chuckling of relief, the giggling of silliness, the tittering of nervousness, the sniggering of derision, and the ambivalent laughter evoked by tickling. Anger too has its variety of tones, as in the anger of assertiveness, of pain, of rage, of hate, of belittlement, of self-protection, of championing another, and of indignation at what's unfair.

As inadequate as language is for fully conveying emotional experience, there are, nonetheless, ways in which words, especially poetry, bring us closer to our feelings. To paraphrase an ancient wisdom of the East:

Even though it is not the moon, the pointing finger directs our perception to the beauty of the moon, just as well-aimed words direct our awareness to the richness of our feelings even though language is not itself emotion.

With this in mind, I hope my lunar perspective on the feeling nature will motivate you to disinter the wealth of your full emotional experience. (I use the term lunar because the moon is an ancient symbol for feelings.)

And, while we are all as unique in our emotional natures as the wave patterns on a beach, we all share significant similarities in how we feel. Some of these similarities are explored here; others are only apprehensible through a personal opening to feelings; still others are enigmatic, perhaps permanently beyond the realm of understanding.

*Lately I looked into your eye, Oh Life!
And I seemed to sink into the unfathomable.
But you pulled me out with a golden rod.
You laughed mockingly when I called you unfathomable.
All fish talk like that you said.
What they cannot fathom is unfathomable.*

– Author unknown

We improve our health on almost every level by declaring an amnesty in the war we have been taught to wage against our feelings. We come alive when we reclaim the energy spent scrupulously containing our emotions or narrowly channeling them into sanitized forms of niceness and forced frivolity.

Perhaps we can be encouraged to reclaim our emotions by the poet Rumi who, like many mystics, uses the fish as a human symbol, and water and the ocean as representations of feelings and the feeling nature.

*. . . Don't wander away.
Look, fish, at the ocean behind you
Go back where you came from, sea creature.*

*You hear the sound of water and you know where you want to be
Why wait? You've gone places you regret going,
for money and such. Don't do that again.
Water says, "Live here.
Don't carry me around in buckets and pans."
False duties! Rest and be quiet.*

FUNDAMENTAL DYNAMICS OF THE EMOTIONAL NATURE

The true opposite of depression is not gaiety or absence of pain, but vitality, the freedom to experience spontaneous feelings. It is part of the kaleidoscope of life that feelings are not only cheerful, beautiful, and good.

– Alice Miller

We enhance our ability to fully feel with an understanding of the four key dynamics of the emotional nature: wholism, polarity, ambivalence, and flow. These dynamics are explored throughout this chapter to illustrate fundamental ways in which feeling is different than thinking.

While thinking and feeling serve many separate discreet functions, it is noteworthy that they complement each other in enriching ways. Thinking, for example, enhances our ability to communicate our feelings when we write or speak poetically, while feeling enhances our listener's understanding of us when we speak passionately.

The interrelationship of the thinking and feeling function is reflected in the tarot, a specialized deck of cards traditionally used for fortune telling but currently gaining popularity as a tool of self-exploration. The tarot has four suits of cards representing different psychic functions. The suit of cups (hearts in a traditional card deck) represents distinct emotional states, and the suit of swords (spades) represents discrete cognitive states.

Interestingly, there are a number of sword cards that represent rigid mental processes in which thoughts (swords) are not balanced by emotions (cups) and consequently turn on themselves and deteriorate into destructive mental states. Similarly certain cup cards describe painful emotional conditions that are caused by emotional impulsiveness and a lack of forethought.

If there could be such a thing as an objective tarot reading for our culture I believe it would be replete with the suit of swords, as our thinking processes typically dominate and often obliterate our feelings.

Feeling and thinking are balanced and mutually enhance each other in the healthy individual. When either one dominates, there is considerable life diminishment. I have experienced both kinds of imbalance many times. When I have overvalued either thinking or feeling, I have often made poor choices or decisions. This has happened to me a number of times in the arena of romance. When I have simply followed my feelings and thrown reasonable caution to the wind, I have failed to perceive obvious incompatibilities that were clear warnings not to enter the dysfunctional relationships that ensued.

Similarly when I chose partners simply on the basis of a logical checklist, ignoring the fact that we had no real emotional chemistry, the relationships that ensued commonly ended with many hurt feelings of unfulfilled promise. Experience has since taught me that the best decisions include balanced input from both faculties: they feel right . . . they “think” right.

Finally, while feeling and thinking are both fundamental to mental health, it is noteworthy that the 1994 PBS special, *Human Quest*, concluded that the key distinguishing characteristic between humans and computers was: “I feel, therefore I am,” and not “I think, therefore I am.”

WHOLISM

The emotions will not feel like stepchildren, with only the best-dressed being admitted – they will not need to cry out for expression, for they will be fully admitted as members of the family of the self.

– Jane Roberts

We are, all of us, exceedingly complex creatures and do ourselves a service in regarding ourselves as complex. Otherwise, we live in a dream world of nonexistent, simplistic black-and-white notions which simply do not apply to human life. There are none of us who are all good, all bad, all wise, all stupid or all anything at all. We are vast combinations of every kind of characteristic possible . . . and the world we affect is full of subtle and blatant incongruities and complex shadings, too.

– Theodore Rubin

Wholism refers to the fact that the emotional nature cannot be broken down into individual, separate feelings existing independently from one another. Feeling is bound to wholism more than thinking. We generally have considerably more choice (though certainly nothing like total freedom) about our thoughts. We can categorize and store thoughts in memory, recall them selectively, and – depending on our ability to concentrate – hold them in awareness when we want to. We can even go to libraries and bookstores and “shop” for thoughts and ideas that we would prefer to contemplate.

We have no such luxury with our feelings. I may decide to be happy. I may tell everyone I know “I am happy.” I may even inscribe it in gold letters on parchment to prove it to myself. But if I do not happen to actually feel happy, than my proclaimed feeling has about as much weight as the printed word happy.

The feeling nature is not like a supermarket where only the favorite brands of emotion can be selected from a larger number of available products. The cart of the psyche cannot be filled with pleasant emotions while the unpleasant ones are left on the shelf.

No matter how sophisticated advertisers become in convincing us that what they are selling creates preferred emotional states, their products will bring us rashes and gastrointestinal distress before they bring us love and happiness.

Real joy cannot be purchased without a requisite amount of grief, as love cannot be purchased without strife, or forgiveness bought without blame. Wrath, fear, and sadness are as irreplaceable to the fully feeling person as love, trust, and joy. Our lives become more resplendent when we use the entire wardrobe of emotional color, not just pink, glitter, and baby blue.

Individuals who only identify with “positive” feelings often become bland, deadened, and dissociated in a feeling-less desert, a true no-man’s-land. In the psychic desert of disavowed emotion, the smoldering heat of repressed anger evaporates our feelings of love and affection, leaving us emotionally dehydrated. Rejecting emotions because they are sometimes unpleasant is like cutting off body parts because they are not pretty. There is an old saying:

To the wise man, good and bad luck are like his right and left hands –
he uses both to his advantage.

The same is equally true of the “good” and “bad” emotions. “Choosing” only preferred feelings is like choosing to eat without accepting the necessity of elimination. Little wonder Westerners are the most constipated people, physically and emotionally, of all societies.

POLARITY

*. . . of all that I am, I am also the opposite. I cannot rid myself of my
demons without risking that my angels will flee with them.*

– Sheldon Kopp

The dynamic of polarity governs the many phenomena in life that are composed of opposing but interrelated halves. In chemistry polarity manifests as the positive and negative terminals of a battery; in physics in the positively charged protons and negatively charged electrons of atoms. In everyday life polarity is seen in such interdependent opposites as night and day, hot and cold, male and female, hunger and satiation.

In the East the principle of polarity is called the *Tao*, symbolized by interpenetrating halves of a circle, as shown on this book’s cover. The Tao symbol illustrates that human life, and all of nature and the cosmos, is characterized by processes composed of opposite but complementary halves.

Our emotional natures are also made up of many pairs or poles of seemingly opposite experiences. Common emotional polarities are: happiness and sadness, like and dislike, trust and suspicion, elation and depression.

And so, just as a magnet cannot exist without opposite poles, we cannot be fully feeling without embracing our inherent emotional polarities. We cannot feel good without sometimes feeling bad. In the words of Ken Wilber:

*. . . in seeking to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative,
we have forgotten that the positive is defined only in terms of the
negative. To destroy the negative is, at the same time, to destroy all
possibility of enjoying its opposite.*

Our language unfortunately reflects our culture’s dearth of feeling and we lack words to describe many essential emotional polarities. Consequently, we must use the word love to pair with a variety of opposite feeling experiences: love and hate, love and loneliness, love and envy, love and disgust, love and guile, love and abandonment. The Greeks, who do not seem to suffer the same emotional emaciation as most Westerners, do not have this problem with the word love. They have separate words for thirteen different emotional experiences of love.

A human being authentically experiences a particular “positive” feeling as fully as she is

willing to fully feel its “negative” correlate. The richness and authenticity of a person’s laugh parallels the availability of his tears. The thrill of an act of courage is measured in the degree of fear it overcomes. The enrichment of love relates directly to its contrast with loneliness. The depth of forgiveness depends on the felt intensity of blame.

There are gradated bands of emotional intensity that stretch between each pair of emotional opposites. Our emotional experience shifts from one pole to another along a continuum of feeling, and there are many different degrees of feeling on each particular emotional continuum. We are all subject to both gradual and sudden oscillations between the emotional extremes of the various feeling continua.

Between terrified paranoia and fully vulnerable trust, there are varying degrees of feeling suspicious or safe. Between exhilarating joy and wishing-for-death sorrow there are numerous shades of being glad or being sad. Between heart-pounding love and exploding hate there are many less intense states of like and dislike.

At the midpoint of each continuum, there is a middle ground where we do not experience any emotional excitation at all. Disinterest, for example, lies midway between heart-pounding love and intense hate, on the borderline between like and dislike. My friend Herbie Monroe expounded on this concept by saying: “I love the West Coast, I hate the East Coast, and I could care less about Nebraska.”

When we refuse to feel the full intensity of our emotions, we become depressed and stuck in the “safe” and dreary midland plains of the emotional continua. Apathy is a common result of throwing out the baby of emotional vitality with the bath water of unaccepted feelings. As I write I remember a despondent neighbor of mine who invariably responded to my greeting of “How are you today, Mr. S.?” with a deadened response of “Fair to middling, thanks.”

The practice of fully feeling teaches us to move more fluidly along the different bands of the emotional spectrum. Day to day, and sometimes hour to hour, vacillations may occur on any particular continuum. On the love and loneliness continuum, for instance, we may experience many subtleties of feeling connected or separate. Sometimes with little apparent reason, we may suddenly feel particularly lonely and cut off; and then, seemingly out of nowhere, we may just as suddenly feel strong loving connectedness with others.

There are also times when we are legitimately at rest in the middle of a particular continuum, and neither polar feeling is present. At any given moment we might not feel lonely or loving. Each continuum also has a midpoint that is different than apathy and disinterest, yet that is genuinely restful. When all the feeling continua are truly at rest, we experience relaxation and peace.

Peacefulness is also a transient experience. When we try to permanently install tranquility, we usually recreate the deadened middle ground of not feeling. In such instances, peace gradually devolves into depressing bleakness as we squander increasing amounts of energy resisting newly arising feelings.

Finally, there are many complex emotional states experienced by fully feeling people. Sometimes more than one feeling continuum is resonating at once, and we feel a mixture of emotions. This sometimes occurs in deep grieving when the experience of loss is so intense that rage and tears surface simultaneously. Jealousy is also a complex emotional reaction. It is often a turbulent combination of fear, anger, loneliness, and abandonment. Deep experiences of love are another example of compound emotions. Love may involve the simultaneous experience of fondness, affection, hope, joy, trust, and compassion.

UNDERSTANDING POLARITY HELPS US DEAL WITH NORMAL LONELINESS

Many people have tremendous difficulty accepting the normality of lonely feelings. Many survivors instantly crash into deep self-hatred when they feel lonely. Yet, a certain amount of loneliness is absolutely intrinsic to the human condition – no matter how many loving people there are in our lives. In the words of existential psychotherapist Irwin Yalom:

To be human is to be lonely. To become a person means exploring new modes of resting in our loneliness. When we are willing to accept loneliness as a normal, recurring experience of life, we can learn to integrate it more graciously. We do not have to make loneliness or any other “negative” emotion more painful by adding shame, self-abandonment, or self-loathing to it.

AMBIVALENCE

You stay young as long as you can learn, acquire new habits, and suffer contradiction.

– Marie von Ebner Eschenbach

All of us not only have ambivalent feelings but often are ambivalent about each of the feelings we have. Most of us have been at times jealous, envious, arrogant, suspicious, duplicitous, open, honest, and straightforward, and we all have different feelings about these feelings at different times. These are not good and bad feelings especially reserved for good and bad people. These are human feelings, characteristic of all human beings and occurring in varying degrees in all of us as we interact with internal and external conditions.

– Theodore Rubin, *Compassion and Self-Hate*

Of all the complex emotional experiences, ambivalence is possibly the most vilified and misunderstood. Ambivalence occurs when an individual entertains opposing emotional experiences simultaneously.

Ambivalence is also the state of rapidly vascillating between contradictory feelings. Have you ever felt any of these kinds of ambivalence: “I don’t know if I love you or hate you – if I want you to stay or if I want you to go”; “You scare the hell out of me, but I’ll hit you if you come any closer”; “I want to be vulnerable with you, but I’m not sure I can trust you”; “I love golf but when that damn ball keeps slicing I hate myself for playing it”; “I love the melody in

that song but the lyrics make me sick!?”

Almost everyone feels ambivalent at one time or another. Ambivalence commonly occurs at work or in a relationship when part of us loves our job or partner and part of us hates them. In fact, it is virtually impossible to maintain a long-term intimate relationship without occasionally experiencing disconcerting combinations of affection and estrangement. On an even larger scale, it is not possible to be a sentient human being without feeling confusing mixtures of enthusiasm and despair about being alive.

Although conventional wisdom decrees that we should be perpetually thankful for our lives, we all occasionally vacillate between wishing life would last forever and wishing it were over. At moments of great tragedy or loss, we naturally feel that life is an awful curse, and that we might be better off dead.

Almost everyone painfully ponders Hamlet’s famous line “To be or not to be” at one time or another. Freud, for one, believed that life was an ongoing struggle between the instincts to live and to die – to be and exult in living or to expire and leave our recurring encounters with pain behind. He called this ambivalence the conflict between the psychic forces of *Eros* and *Thanatos*.

We are, of course, all going to die one day. Might it not be that the psyche has a drive to surrender to death when our quality of life becomes sufficiently diminished? The research of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross poignantly demonstrates that grieving naturally allows us to relax into that final exit when our time has come.

I also believe that we prepare ourselves for a graceful death by allowing ourselves to grieve all our losses, past and present. Practice in grieving may spare us from struggling unnecessarily against the death process once it has become irreversible. My ongoing experiences of grieving have gradually dissolved much of my old nightmarish fear of death.

There are many common forms of ambivalence. Rabid sports fans are no strangers to it. They often have a love/hate relationship with their teams, and feel strong contrasting emotions when their heroes perform like goats. One current baseball superstar calls his fans the “yea-boo birds” because they flip so frequently between cheering and jeering.

Courage and lovesickness are other common forms of ambivalence. Courage is often action taken in the face of fear. Lovesickness is the disconcerting ambivalence felt by those who fall in love again after being heartbroken. The delightful feelings of hope and connectedness that naturally arise with new love often clash strongly with fears that love will eventually end as it did before. Those who cannot tolerate this ambivalence often flee or unconsciously sabotage their new love rather than chance being hurt again.

Ambivalence also occurs in the experience many people have of laughing and crying at the same time. Because it is so unacceptable to be ambivalent however, most of us conclude that we don’t know whether we are laughing or crying at such times. At our worst, we even denigrate ourselves for having such a contradictory experience.

When we do this, we fail to appreciate the sublime ambivalence of simultaneously experiencing tears and laughter. This particular ambivalence is one of my favorite emotional experiences. It often spontaneously arises in me when my grief begins to turn into relief. As my pain is released through my tears, I am reborn from the death of life alienation into authentic *joie de vivre*.

One of my most moving experiences of this occurred while I was grieving over the fact that I had spent so many years believing my parents’ oft-repeated judgment that I was bad. Suddenly I really “got it” in the deepest part of my being that they had lied and that I was

essentially a good person. I roared in joyous laughter and oscillated continuously and deliciously between laughing and crying for almost an hour.

Tears themselves can be purely ambivalent – simultaneous expressions of both pain and pleasure. I sometimes cry ambivalently when I finally achieve a hard-earned, long-term goal. At such times my tears are both a culmination of joy that my struggle is over and a release of the pain involved in intense, protracted focus. I believe these are the type of tears the great athlete Michael Jordan cried on national television when he was handed the World Basketball Championship trophy that had eluded him for years. It is also noteworthy that at the end of the 1995 NCAA college basketball championship game, many of the members of both teams cried: UCLA in joy, and Arkansas in grief.

AMBIVALENCE AND SPLITTING

*Do I contradict myself?
Very well I contradict myself,
I am large, I contain multitudes.*

– Walt Whitman

*It may be necessary to stretch the heart wide enough to embrace
contradiction and paradox.*

– Thomas Moore, *Care of the Soul*

The fact that it is possible, not to mention normal and healthy, to feel contradictory emotions simultaneously is almost incomprehensible in our culture. Most people repress the unpreferred half of their ambivalence, and only experience it as anxiety. One of my acquaintances did this when he finally felt courageous enough to quit his job. He told me that his heart was pounding and his stomach was full of butterflies but he was not afraid. I believe this is typical of how many of us deny the feeling messages of our bodies.

We are so ruled by black-and-white thinking that we judge ambivalence as evidence of stupidity or defectiveness. Society routinely shames us for having mixed feelings (or opinions) about anyone or anything. The classic movie scene in which the protagonist weeps at a poignant denouement and utters: “I’m so happy!” is beyond the comprehension of most viewers, yet fully feeling people often reverberate delightfully with it.

We are bombarded everywhere with common sense proclamations that decry ambivalence: “Love it or leave it”; “You are either for me or against me”; “You can’t have it both ways”; “You’re either part of the problem or part of the solution”; “Well, make up your mind! Don’t you know how you feel?”

We have probably all been assaulted with the phrase “make up your mind” when we wavered in our feelings about someone or something. How absurd this is, when using our minds to determine our feelings is as impossible as controlling the size, shape, and frequency of the ocean’s waves.

And while we can make up our minds about how we respond to our feelings, we cannot

cognitively predetermine our emotional responses. If a loved one hurts you, you will instinctively feel angry even if you instantly repress your anger. Many survivors reject this observation because their anger was so thoroughly extinguished in “toddlerhood” that their angry reflexes are no longer conscious. Nonetheless, they still register anger unconsciously when they are hurt no matter how loving they have made up their minds to be.

We cannot recover emotionally if we do not resist those who try to bully us out of our ambivalence. We must refuse to pretend that we are absolutely consistent emotionally. Survivors who want to defend their healthy ambivalence can respond to make-up-your-mind assaults by replying that the matter in question is emotional and clearly not a matter of reason or choice.

I remember how my own natural ambivalence was shamed out of me in childhood. If I said I didn’t like something on my favorite television show, I was told that I was stupid for watching it. If I relished my meal except for the canned peas, I was told that I wasn’t hungry and wouldn’t like dessert. If I confided in my mother that I was mad at my best friend, she told me that I shouldn’t play with him anymore. When my anger eventually subsided and I befriended him again, my friendless mother railed: “You little liar you told me you didn’t like him! You’ll get what you deserve when he hurts you again.”

What my mother branded as defective and unreliable in my emotional diversity was actually the still-intact ambivalence of a healthy child. Had she normalized my feelings and helped me vent and resolve them, it wouldn’t have taken me weeks of lonely isolation to “make up” with my friends.

Familial and societal influences eventually destroyed my tolerance for ambivalence and I succumbed to the belief that “real” lovers never get upset with each other. “Wisdom” for me manifested itself as leaving a relationship at the first sign of contradictory, non-loving emotions. Had it been available then, I surely would have bought some sappy product with the inscription “Love means never having to say you’re sorry.”

Many adult children have unrealistic, polarized expectations of love. Convinced that love should preclude disharmony, they sometimes interpret their ambivalence as proof that they are too flawed to love. In the most extreme cases they see their ambivalence as an indicator of mental instability!

Intolerance of ambivalence kills relationships. It destroys them through a process known as splitting. Splitting occurs when feelings of disappointment are repressed (split off) via the tacit agreement that partners will only express appreciative feelings.

Split off emotions are not self-resolving. They gradually accumulate in explosive proportions until a relatively minor complaint triggers them. As they burst disruptively into awareness, our loving feelings disappear and we polarize to the opposite emotional extreme, feeling completely alienated from our partners.

If our stockpile of repressed disappointment is too great or if it erupts too hatefully, loving feelings may not return and the split into alienation may be permanent.

If partners do not react too destructively to splitting, loving feelings may eventually return. If they are accompanied by the original intolerance for ambivalence however, splitting will eventually recur.

Most relationships only survive a limited number of these cataclysmic “splits.” Some, however, are ongoing emotional roller coasters with extreme highs and lows of affection and alienation. Such relationships gradually kill off both partners’ capacity to find joy in each other, and in the worst cases, in life in general.

Relationships that died because of extreme splitting are sometimes revived when one or both partners learn to grieve. Grieving safely releases old hurt feelings, naturally reversing the polarization process of splitting. Old partners may then rediscover the original feelings of attraction they had for each other, and even become friends again. On the other hand, those who don't grieve often remain permanently stuck in hating their "ex's". They never reconnect with the love they actually had – and still often unconsciously have – for their partners.

There is another type of splitting that commonly kills relationships, namely, an intolerance of feelings of separateness. Such an intolerance creates smothering behaviors that asphyxiate relationships. Partners must allow each other ambivalent fluctuations in feelings of closeness and separateness. If only feelings of closeness are allowed, intimacy in a relationship may die as either partner suddenly splits off into extreme withdrawal to ward off suffocation.

Ambivalence and splitting are opposite responses to emotional polarity. They are rarely all-or-none processes. Splitting occurs in varying degrees along a continuum that stretches between pure ambivalence and extreme splitting – between simultaneously feeling contrary emotions and eternally clasping one emotion at the expense of its opposite – between feeling love and hate toward a spouse in a single heartbeat and killing a "perfect" marriage in an instant with a sudden volcanic eruption of bitterness.

"Ambivalating" – a term I picked up from a friend – is a less extreme form of splitting. Ambivalating is a relatively rapid wavering back and forth between opposing emotional experiences. My friend once histrionically parodied extreme ambivalating for me with this dialogue between her emotional polarities:

I want him.
No I don't! He hurts me too much.
But sometimes he makes me feel so good.
Yeah, but he drains all my energy in the process.
But he's such a good person.
No, he's not! He's a jerk!
But his loving side would come out if I moved in with him.
Yikes! That'd be a disaster. I wish he'd just move to Alaska!
God, but I'd miss him. It'd cost me a fortune to visit.
I love him.
I hate him.
I love him!
I hate him!
I love him!?
I hate him!?

When we welcome our normal ambivalence, we achieve deeper self-understanding and make better decisions about complex life issues. Ambivalating is one of the healing processes of psychotherapy. When clients are encouraged to thoroughly explore their conflicting feelings about job or relationship issues, they eventually connect with a deep intuitive sense about what is best for them.

Extended ambivalating can be distressing. In the throes of it, we are frequently tempted to impulsively make a decision just to end our discomfort. I made the worst decisions in my life when I didn't have the courage and self-respect to stay with my ambivalence, and when I didn't understand that sometimes wise decisions only come through months, even years, of ambivalating. This is one reason why Jung said tolerance of ambivalence is an advanced emotional skill and an indicator of mental health.

It is also important to note here a common, dysfunctional response to ambivalence. Some survivors "mentalize" their ambivalence into ambiguity. When their disparate feelings are not experienced directly, they leak into consciousness as unfocused worry and confusion, paralyzing them from making choices and taking actions that would benefit them. This is not healthy ambivalating. Functional ambivalating involves an emotional – sometimes "grief-ful" – exploration of the deepest levels of a conflict. In my experience when all the feeling content around a particular choice is thoroughly experienced, effective resolution eventually results.

As we mature emotionally, we relax more into our ambivalence. We accept the existential fact that recurring experiences of ambivalence are normal in significant relationships. We allow ourselves to experience and benignly communicate our full spectrum of feelings to our intimates. We are less susceptible to destructive splitting because we do not repress our emotions and accumulate them in incendiary proportions.

Acceptance of ambivalence also protects us from internal splitting. The most common disruption of self-esteem that I witness occurs when disowned feelings suddenly erupt into consciousness splitting the individual off into overwhelming toxic shame. The more fully feeling we become, the less likely we are to split off completely from our feelings of self-worth.

AMBIVALENCE AND SPIRITUALITY

As one matures in spiritual life, one becomes more comfortable with paradox, more appreciative of life's ambiguities, its many levels and inherent conflicts. One develops a sense of life's irony, metaphor, and humor and a capacity to embrace the whole, with its beauty and outrageousness, in the graciousness of the heart.

– Jack Kornfield

While many religious traditions espouse that god is omnipresent, we often respond to our inner emotional world as if it were a desolate, godless place. The mystic-poet Rilke wrote eloquently about how unnecessary this is:

*Ah, not to be cut off,
not through the slightest partition
shut out from the law of the stars.
The inner - what is it?
if not intensified sky,
hurled through with birds and deep*

with the winds of homecoming.

When we spilt off the “negative” half of our emotional experience, we infer that god cannot be found there. It is as if we are saying that our “negative” emotions are ungodly and not a useful part of creation. When we do this, we make Satan real and create a devil’s hell within us. Feelings that are banished as unholy manifest unconsciously in infernal ways.

Some of my deepest openings to the love of God and the direct apprehension of God’s omnipresence came from finally surrendering to previously disavowed feelings. These openings typically unfolded as pure and profound ambivalence.

Experiences of pure ambivalence sometimes open our awareness to the transcendental “Oneness” that unites all polarities. Taoists believe an invisible, underlying oneness connects and harmonizes all disparities. This is symbolized by the glyph of the Tao which unites all halves within a circle and shows each half as containing the seed of its opposite.

I have been graced several times with glimpses of a deeper, all-pervading Unity in settings of great natural beauty. Once while I was wandering in the mountains fully feeling the depths of my loneliness, I came upon a panorama of such magnificence that I was immediately awestruck. The exquisite beauty before me filled my heart with joy. Tears rolled down my face and I laughed aloud as I felt myself spiritually and emotionally merging with a benevolent force that seemed to be the source and unifying essence of everything. The modern mystic R.M. Bucke describes a similar experience:

Now came a period of rapture so intense that the universe stood still, as if amazed at the unutterable majesty of the spectacle. Only one in all the infinite universe! The All-loving, the perfect One . . . In that same wonderful moment of what might be called supernal bliss, came illumination . . . What joy when I saw there was no break in the chain – not a link left out – everything in its place and time. Worlds, systems, all blended into one harmonious whole.

FLOW

We, too, the children of the earth, have our moon phases all through the year; the darkness, the delivery from darkness, the waxing and the waning.

– Faith Baldwin

It is terribly amusing how many different climates of feeling one can go through in a day.

– Anne Morrow Lindberg

Embracing ambivalence does not mean always feeling ambivalent. As stated earlier, there

are many times when we are not emotionally resonating and do not feel anything at all. There are also many times when it is appropriate to purely feel one emotional extreme or another.

Embracing ambivalence is just one of the ways that we become more fully feeling. It is a way that bestows the irreplaceable benefit of emotional flexibility and flow.

Flow is a term that describes the ever-shifting, unpredictable rise and fall of emotions. An appreciation of flow, the fluid quality of the emotional nature, allows us to respond to our feelings in healthy ways. When we surrender to our emotional flow, we reclaim the thrilling spontaneity we were born with – that we can still see in any child who has not been overdisciplined.

Unfortunately, most of us only “go with the flow” when it is in a preferred direction. At other times, we struggle so fiercely against unpreferred feelings, that we become as entrapped in them as the archetypal circus clown frantically battling a piece of flypaper.

Avoidance of unwanted emotions also commonly leaves us trapped in chronic, low-grade manifestations of them. Many long-enduring moods are caused by repressed emotions that slowly and biliously leak into consciousness. When underlying emotions are offered no effective expression and release, the moods they create contaminate and dominate awareness for inordinately long periods of time.

In the past, when I had absolutely no outlet for my anger, I suffered prolonged bouts of sullen irritability. And until I ended a decades-long drought of tears, I often spent weeks in melancholic withdrawal from life.

Moodiness is a very slow and inefficient way of processing feelings. He who doesn’t cry may brood and wallow incessantly in despondency. She who can’t find a constructive release for her anger may live in bitterness prickled by an anger which can only smolder in prolonged bouts of hostile self-criticism. The most expeditious way to get past an unpleasant emotional experience is to embrace it and to fully feel and express it.

Many survivors do further harm to themselves by trying to hold onto preferred feelings for longer than their actual duration. Feelings of love, happiness, and forgiveness feel so good that we cannot help but want them to be everlasting.

My most consistent way of reinjuring myself occurs when I resist my emotional flow, and unconsciously try to hang on to a positive feeling that is no longer mine. Buddhists say that this kind of clinging is one of the greatest sources of unnecessary human suffering.

Unfortunately, the best that can be done with any harmonious, pleasurable feeling is to enjoy it while it lasts. Nowhere is this more true than in the emotional realm. When an emotional experience has shifted, we best support ourselves by accepting its loss as shamelessly as possible and by making a commitment to love and accept ourselves no matter what we feel – no matter what storms come with our emotional weather.

When we recover the ability to grieve, we move more gracefully through difficult emotional transitions. The temporary departure of loving and happy feelings sometimes feels like the death of our sense of well-being. Grieving is helpful at such times, and often promotes the rebirth of preferred feelings.

A wonderful grace of self-renewal comes from immersion in the invigorating waters of fully and flexibly feeling. For most of us, this immersion begins when we open to the process of grieving the losses of our childhoods – the subject of the next three chapters.

4

THE GIFTS OF GRIEVING

The distaste for mourning is, I think, influenced by a secular hedonism, which seeks to banish the possibility of loss from normal life by a form of emotional sophistry.

– Peter Marris, *Loss and Change*

All we really need to do is acknowledge our sadness . . . Perhaps we still think that if we become willing to feel it, we must go around sad the rest of our lives . . . When people truly open themselves to a particular feeling, even deep grief or rage, the expression of that feeling only lasts a few minutes. Further they always feel good afterwards. People tell me they feel cleansed, whole, light. I have never seen anyone who did not feel better after becoming willing to feel something they had been holding back.

– Gay Hendricks, *Learning To Love Yourself*

Grieving plays an essential role in the process of reclaiming the capacity to fully feel. An individual's emotional recovery is, in fact, reflected in the degree to which she reclaims and regularly welcomes grieving as the ongoing, life-enhancing process that it is.

Grieving can restore our enthusiasm for life no matter how dire and tragic our losses. This chapter describes the restorative effects of grieving, while [Chapter 5](#) explores the intricacies of effective grieving.

*Those who will not step beneath
the still surface on the well of grief
turning down through its black water
to the place we cannot breathe
will never know the source*

*from which we drink the secret water
cold and clear
nor find in the darkness glimmering
the small round coins thrown
by those who wished for something else.*

– David Whyte

GRIEVING AND RECLAIMING THE LOSSES OF CHILDHOOD

Whether a child's mental ability is available for use depends on how emotionally tied up he is. Repression acts like a dam that can narrow the river of intelligence to a mere trickle. There are youngsters whose tested IQ's have jumped 60 to 100 points when emotional blocks have been removed.

– Dorothy Corkille Briggs

Time does not heal wounds without acknowledgement of what has happened. You need to clarify your feelings and express them in a way that defines in detail what you have lost and how much you care about what you have lost . . .

– Peter Leech & Zeva Singer

Grieving is the age-old healthy human process of expressing sadness and anger about hurt and loss. It is the psyche's natural way of releasing the pain caused by the loss of someone or something we value. Grieving is as necessary to emotional health as urinating and defecating are to physical health. Grieving removes the emotional energy of hurt and pain from the psyche, as the physiological functions of elimination remove chemical toxins from the body.

Survivors need to grieve because much of their individuality and expressiveness was deadened or lost during childhood. The poet Sheila Bender writes about her father's role in her childhood losses:

*At home you entered my head like a sanitation
crew and swept my dreams as if they were litter.
Cleaned of myself I was lost to the currents
Your expectations were . . .*

Grieving is the natural process of bringing new life and hope out of loss and death. When we work through our denial and recognize exactly how we were diminished by our parents, grieving helps us exhume the parts of ourselves that were sent to an early grave in childhood.

Remembering the past accurately and searching for the gems of ourselves that are lost there usually requires hard work and patience. Excavating through childhood memories

sometimes feels as laborious and treacherous as hand-mining for gold in an unstable hillside. Sometimes the weight of our old unprocessed pain feels like the weight of the earth caving in on us. Fortunately, the processes of grieving can sluice away this heavy residue of pain. Beneath the pain, we commonly discover the rich veins of self-compassion and self-protective courage that illuminate the core of each of us. Inside that core we find the strengths and talents that have lain dormant in us all our lives.

Grieving reawakens our natural inclination to shuck off unnecessary limitation. It rejuvenates our innate enthusiasm to continuously grow and expand. Every infant naturally challenges the limits of his crib, begins to crawl, braves the fear of falling, endures the pain of many falls, and eventually learns to walk. Every toddler eagerly seeks the development of new abilities, no matter how painstaking they are to acquire, until his spirited inquisitiveness is dampened by shaming or excessive punishment.

Grieving rekindles and fuels our passion to reengage the ongoing developmental processes of life, regardless of where they were stalled by our parents. Grieving is the natural response to being thwarted. It helps us to reverse our retreat into hermitages of stagnant routine. It resuscitates our enthusiasm to take new risks, the importance of which is captured herein:

RISKS

To laugh is – to risk appearing the fool.

To weep is – to risk appearing sentimental.

To reach out for another is – to risk involvement.

To expose feelings is – to risk exposing your true self.

To place your ideas, your dreams before the crowd is – to risk their loss.

To love is – to risk not being loved in return.

To live is – to risk dying. To hope is – to risk despair.

To try is – to risk failure.

But risks must be taken, because the greatest hazard in life is to risk nothing. The person who risks nothing, does nothing, has nothing and is nothing. He may avoid suffering and sorrow, but he simply cannot learn, feel, grow, love – live. Chained by his certitudes, he is a slave, he has forfeited freedom. Only a person who risks is free.

– Author unknown

THE EMOTIONS RECOVERED IN GRIEVING FUEL INTENTIONALITY

Parents may be totally inaccessible emotionally or randomly so. The child may suffer tremendous deficits in emotional attachment . . . The child manages to cope but grows up without a healthy sense of self

*coming from within . . . (with) no sense of anything internal – of
motive, wish, and feeling coming from within.*

– Dennis Wholey

Grieving unlocks the motivating force of intentionality. *Intentionality* is the process of fully investing our mental, spiritual, and emotional energy in our personal dreams and ambitions.

Perhaps the greatest intention we can have is that of recovering from our childhood losses and attaining the normal rewards of a balanced life. When we pursue recovery with the same kind of passion that we had as children wholeheartedly yearning for a special Christmas gift, we are empowering ourselves through intentionality.

The list at the end of this section describes fundamental human experiences that make life more fulfilling. Many of us were shamed out of wanting these everyday “reasons for living” long before we can remember. Many of us don’t even realize that much of our ongoing suffering comes from being without these normal life entitlements.

It is hard to know that something is missing when it has never been experienced. If a child grows up in an inner-city tenement, how can she know how much she is impoverished by never seeing flowers, trees, and unspoiled nature? When I give this list of intentions to clients and students, they sometimes seem shocked that these are reasonable expectations of life. How can a survivor know that his need for active love is almost as important as his need for food and air, when he has never had it? When a child has never been fully engaged while growing up, he usually has great difficulty realizing that much of his pain is about not being seen, heard, or appreciated.

If we are lacking in our ability to invoke intentionality, it is usually because we grew up in families where healthy hopefulness was crushed and seemingly extinguished. There is a plethora of heartbreaking stories in the recovery literature of parents exterminating their children’s aspirations, killing their zest for life, and leaving them believing there is little or nothing worth living for (see Jane Middleton-Moz’s *Children Of Trauma*).

For many survivors a crucial step in recovery occurs when they decide they *want* to learn how to want again! Sheila Bender encourages us to take this step in this excerpt from her poem *Home Tides*:

*It was your father’s idea
the military regime for his first
son, you, fifteen months old
and climbing from the crib, toddling
to where your parents were.
He hit you when you got there
trying to break your will.*

*Tender sand crab,
lonely dingy trailing line,
wanderer with no shoes,
how many times did you go under*

before the currents became your home?

*You must work now to remember
the courage and desire that brought you
from the crib. You must come up
toward all that you need.*

Grieving cleanses our hearts of all the painful disappointments that forced us to finally give up on passionately desiring fulfillment. Grieving empties out old hurt so that there is room in the heart to wish and want and dream again. Grieving rekindles an inner fire which makes us zealous about investing our hopes and desires in the intentions listed below. We can now renounce the lie that it is bad and selfish to want and acquire these gifts of life. The fervor of wanting what is rightfully ours can readily be transmuted into motivation for practically attaining it.

You are encouraged to use your intuition to select what appeals to you from the intentions that follow. “Take the best, and leave the rest,” as they say in Twelve Step meetings. You may also benefit by adding your own personalized intentions to this list. If you are codependent, I invite you to pay special attention to intention #23. Many codependents still believe they don’t deserve a fair share of life’s normal blessings. But, just as every human being deserves a fair share of the basic good experiences of life, so do you. Codependents aid their recovery immensely when they learn to direct the same care and consideration they give to others equally to themselves. Perhaps the following inverted paraphrase will help you with this: “Do unto yourself, as you do unto others.”

SUGGESTED INTENTIONS FOR RECOVERY

*When the Guest is being searched for, it is the intensity of the longing
for the Guest that does all the work.*

– Kabir

1. I want to develop a more consistently loving and accepting relationship with myself. I want an increasing capacity for self-acceptance.
2. I want to become the best possible friend to myself.
3. I want my relationships to be based on love, respect, fairness, and mutual support.
4. I want to expand into full, uninhibited self-expression.
5. I want to attain the best possible physical health.
6. I want to cultivate a balance of exuberance and peace.
7. I want to attract to myself loving friends and loving community.
8. I want increasing freedom from toxic shame.
9. I want increasing freedom from unnecessary fear.
10. I want rewarding and fulfilling work.

11. I want a healthy amount of peace of mind, spirit, soul, and body.
12. I want to increase my capacity to play and have fun.
13. I want to make plenty of room for beauty and nature in my life.
14. I want sufficient physical and monetary resources.
15. I want a fair amount of help (self, human, or divine) to get what I need.
16. I want divine love, grace, and blessing.
17. I want a balance of work, play, and rest.
18. I want a balance of stability and change.
19. I want a balance of loving interaction and healthy self-sufficiency.
20. I want full emotional expression with a balance of laughter and tears.
21. I want sexual satisfaction.
22. I want to express my anger in effective and nonabusive ways.
23. I want all this for each and every other human being as well as myself.

GRIEVING AWAKENS SELF-COMPASSION

When we have compassion, pain dissolves into love.

– Stephen Levine

We show so little mercy to ourselves. We barricade the heart and feel alone in a hostile world. We seldom let go of our judgment and make room in our heart for ourselves. How can we so lack compassion for this being we feel suffering in our heart? If we fully acknowledge our pain, it would be difficult not to be swept with a care and compassion for our own well-being.

– Stephen Levine

When the profound sadness of childhood is fully felt without shame or self-hate, the heart opens with a wonderful yearning to reclaim for the self all that was lost. The poet and novelist Alice Walker writes eloquently about this:

*Now I can confess the sorrow
of my heart
as the tears flow
and I see again with memory's bright eye
my dearest companion cut down
and can bear to resee myself
so lonely and small
there in the sunny meadows
and shaded woods
of childhood*

*where my crushed spirit
and stricken heart
ran in circles
looking for a friend.*

*Soon I will have known fifty summers.
Perhaps that is why
my heart
an imprisoned tree
so long clutched tight
inside its core
insists
on shedding
like iron leaves
the bars
from its cell.*

*O landscape of my birth
you have never been far from my heart.
It is I who have been far. If you will take me back
Know that I
Am yours.*

As my tears about my childhood losses became shame-free, I found myself feeling an ever-increasing desire to give myself the care I never received. My tears have made me increasingly tender and kind with myself (and others) in times of difficulty. They have awakened in me a healthy parenting instinct to open my heart even more to my inner child – especially when he is hurting.

Grieving helps me in the present to more effectively weather the ongoing, unpredictable disappointments of life. It commonly restores me to a joyous appreciation of life and its many ongoing rewards. Each of us faces losses in the future, many of which will be beyond our control. Grieving helps us to spring back from calamity in a way that naturally takes the shame and despondency out of setbacks. I have been delighted to see many clients and friends discovering self-compassion through their practice of grieving. I have had hundreds, perhaps thousands, of sessions that began with a client in deep despair and ended with a renewal of hopefulness after an immersion in grieving.

*I will, I will accept myself
With hope and fear and wonder
And what I have joined together
Let no man put asunder.*

– Dory Preven

GRIEVING RECHARGES THE INSTINCT OF SELF-PROTECTION

I care for myself. The more solitary, the more friendless, the more unsustained I am, the more I will respect myself.

– Jane Eyre

When I allow myself to feel grief-ful anger about my early abuse, I know that I will never again silently surrender to any repetition of it. And when I talk unashamedly about my childhood losses and connect to my instinctual blaming feelings about that injustice, my desire to invest time and energy in my recovery naturally increases.

The warming anger of grieving is especially helpful in thawing the inner child out of the frozenness of fear. Once I learned safe and nonabusive ways to express my anger about my parents' bullying, I found that my fears steadily decreased. In retrospect, it seems as if my inner child had been perpetually hiding, petrified in fear, waiting to see if my maturing adult self would ever take a stance of personal power and assertiveness. Would my adult self ever learn how to say no to abuse? Would he ever demand respect and a fair share of adult rights? Would he ever learn to stand up for the child in me?

Effective anger work often spontaneously awakens our basic instinct of self-protection. This recovered instinct is the basis of healthy assertiveness. It allows many survivors to feel safe for the first time in their lives. It can summon up a fierceness as instinctual as a mother bear's – that can, if necessary, be used to ward off the aggression of others.

Our healthy anger empowers us to persist in recovery even when we are daunted by the unconscious fear that we will be punished as we were in childhood for acting in our own behalf. Anger is essential for extinguishing the learned habits of self-hatred and unproductive self-criticism that impede our growth (see [Chapter 7](#)).

GRIEVING SOOTHES EMOTIONAL FLASHBACKS

In fact, feelings are best regarded as roadside pointers toward lessons we need to learn on our path. Each time there is something we are really angry about or scared of, there is a powerful lesson to be learned. It is usually something we have withdrawn from in the past that we are now getting the opportunity to embrace.

– Gay Hendrix, *Learning To Love Yourself*

Survivors of long periods of abuse are often subject to a phenomenon that I have termed emotional flashbacks. Emotional flashbacks are sudden or prolonged regressions into the emotional states that accompanied the traumas of childhood. They are intensely painful experiences of the fear, depression, self-hatred, and shame of the past.

Emotional flashbacks are similar to the flashbacks of combat veterans, but they rarely involve hallucinations of the original traumatizing events. However, if the survivor focuses on

the feelings of the flashback, she can sometimes bring into awareness memories of the events that spawned them.

Emotional flashbacks can make us feel quite incapacitated. Survivors often experience paralyzing flashbacks when they try to claim rights they were denied in childhood.

I work with many clients who experience tremendous anxiety when they try to reclaim the right to say no. Merely thinking about saying no floods them with so much fear or guilt that they can't make themselves say it. To the inner child, who dominates consciousness at such times, it is as if he is back at home about to be harshly punished for being "so" contrary.

Many of my clients have struggled for years to regain a full capacity to say no because of the intensity of these kinds of flashbacks. Most of them experienced the greatest difficulty saying no to people who reminded them of their parents, or to requests they were never allowed to refuse in childhood.

The degree of difficulty in reclaiming any right of self-expression is usually proportionate to the degree of trauma the child experienced when that right was taken away.

This is why assertiveness is sometimes not a simple matter of choice or willpower, and why some people derive little benefit from the type of assertiveness training that only employs cognitive techniques. Until grieving has decreased the fear that automatically attaches to situations that call for assertiveness, the survivor feels too overwhelmed to speak up. Many survivors never even entertain the idea of taking assertiveness training because the mere thought of learning to be outspoken induces a painful emotional flashback!

THE DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILY AS WAR ZONE

The flashbacks of combat veterans and survivors of dysfunctional families often have similar antecedents. Members of both groups were forced to spend long periods of time in hyper-anxious states. The soldier who lives for weeks and months in hostile territory where he may be killed at any moment spends so much time frozen in terror that he becomes habitually fearful. The child who lives with a constantly angry parent never knows when he may be hit with another barrage of what often feels like homicidal rage.

Both these situations carry the terrifying suspense of constantly anticipating ambush or incoming artillery fire. The child's situation is sometimes worse as he typically serves a longer tour of duty in his war zone.

Children in abusive families are often struck or screamed at without warning. I have worked with many survivors who have spontaneously come up with the image of a war zone to describe their childhood homes. Many were "ambushed" repeatedly at the table for normal acts of self-expression. Many also extend the metaphor by saying they felt like prisoners of war. They had few or no rights, could not escape, and had no one to appeal to, no matter how badly they were treated.

Some had it even worse than prisoners of war, who are at least nominally guaranteed certain rights by the Geneva Convention. Until recently, there was nowhere a child could go to appeal for fair treatment. And even now, Child Protective Services cannot help unless the child's body is physically marked by mistreatment. Psychotherapist Jane Middleton-Moz quotes poet Nanci Presley-Holley on this theme in her book *Children Of Trauma*:

*And I was unarmed
I never got just the one-year tour of duty
In some battle-torn country
I was there for the duration
from birth to age 18
Escaping like a prisoner of war
Only to be snapped back into the fold
When they'd find out where I lived
Or I broke down and told
Normal childhood activities like play?
Not this child I was always combat ready
Training myself to survive
I had to be on guard, alert
For the fist in the stomach, a slap upside the head
Because I'd spoken when I was supposed to be quiet
Or asked for something to eat
Or even colored over the lines
I never knew when the flak would hit
There was never any warning
I wished there'd been someone to scream "incoming"*

*Nighttime was the worst
But unlike armed camps
There weren't any sentries
Laying in my bed
Hovering between exhaustion and sleep
Listening for the whisper of the intruder
Just in case he crept toward my room
Or waking to find he'd already infiltrated
And was laying on top of me
How could I do anything else
... Except play dead?*

When a person is forced to spend inordinate amounts of time fearfully anticipating attack, she may develop a condition called post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD. PTSD is characterized by severe anxiety and fearfulness. It often handicaps the survivor with a terrifying sense of impending doom. Individuals so afflicted can be triggered by the most innocuous cue into a prolonged emotional flashback. Sometimes they feel as if they are vividly and painfully reliving the full experience of past trauma. When PTSD is especially severe it is like being suspended in a permanent emotional flashback.

PTSD is sometimes caused solely by witnessing someone else's abuse. Some combat veterans' worst nightmares (sleeping emotional flashbacks) pivot around witnessing a friend being wounded or killed. The emotional impact can be quite similar when a child sees her

mother or sibling being traumatically abused. The earliest challenges to my illusions of a happy childhood came from the emotional flashbacks of fear and horror that accompanied a sudden memory of my father “giving” my sister a beating.

Various stimuli can trigger emotional flashbacks. Any person, place, or event that is reminiscent of childhood may trigger a stultifying flashback. Sometimes the resemblance can be quite remote. If all or most of the significant adults in our childhood were threatening or actively hostile, then every encounter with a new person may trigger our fear. If it was just the men who were abusive, then all new men may make us afraid. If we were criticized whenever we talked at the family dinner table, then we may “flashback” any time we eat around others, or any time we are about to speak.

In fact, it appears that most of us were wounded in our ability to talk, for surveys show that public speaking is the number one fear among Americans. This suggests that even the thought of speaking in front of a group creates such frightening emotional flashbacks that most people immediately dismiss the idea.

If you would like to assess whether this is true for you, try holding an image of yourself speaking in front of an audience. Does this trigger any associated memories of being attacked for what you had to say earlier in your life?

If you feel any fear or shame, try to focus on the physical sensations of that feeling. You may find that your feeling reminds you of some conversational experience in childhood. Perhaps it reminds you of your parents’ reactions to what you had to say at the kitchen table or on long rides in the family car. Maybe this in turn fills you with a sense of being small and unprotected with something terrible about to happen. Maybe you have some sad or angry feelings about this. If you let yourself grieve out these feelings, you may notice a release of any tension that you feel.

Emotional flashbacks may even afflict those of us who were not actively abused, but who grew up in families in which there was extensive neglect and disinterest. Minor disappointments in present-time adult relationships may retrigger the same feelings of emptiness, worthlessness, and loneliness that typically plague emotionally abandoned children. When these flashbacks are at their worst, we may painfully reverberate with every past abandonment and feel as if we are surely, once again, about to be deserted.

Emotional flashbacks are especially upsetting when the adult child doesn’t know what they are. The survivor’s feelings of fear and shame rapidly intensify because these sudden emotional eruptions make absolutely no sense to him. He is likely to interpret them as just more convincing evidence that he is stupid and terribly defective.

Anger is a powerful tool for resolving flashbacks in the moment. When we allow ourselves to get mad about these revisitations of past intimidations, we remind ourselves that we are no longer helpless children, but rather powerful adults who are quite capable of self-protection. I find it particularly helpful at such times to be angry about both the original abuse and the current unfairness of having to suffer flashbacks. This inner self-championing often disperses my fear.

Also noteworthy here are the results of a recent follow-up study on the children in the Chowchilla kidnapping who were buried underground in a bus for several days. The study determined that the only child who healed quickly from fearful emotional flashbacks was the one who did a great deal of angry yelling and pounding on the ceiling of the bus. (His actions also led to the discovery and rescue of the buried children.)

Some survivors are not beset by flashbacks until years after they leave their family. There

are at least two reasons for this. Firstly, the psyche's need for emotional release becomes greater and greater as habitual repression increases our reservoirs of unconscious pain. When the accumulation of repressed emotion gets too great for containment, the pain may begin to erupt as emotional flashbacks.

Secondly, flashbacks sometimes do not occur until the survivor is ready (although not necessary willing) to grieve his childhood losses. This is particularly disconcerting to survivors who initially feel elated and liberated by challenging their denial about poor parenting. They sometimes conclude that recovery is making them worse, instead of realizing that their flashbacks are merely heralding the next phase of their recovery process.

Emotional flashbacks are nothing to be ashamed of. They are the psyche's healthy attempts to vividly recreate the past so we can see it more accurately and resolve ongoing problems that stem from it.

Unfortunately many of us don't know how to harvest the opportunities inherent in flashbacks. Instead of learning from them, many of us automatically assume that we are bad and being justly punished whenever we have an emotional flashback. Because our parents made us believe it was our fault that they hurt us ("You asked for it – now I have to punish you!"), we typically respond to emotional flashbacks with shame and self-hatred. Self-blame has, in fact, become our instant response to almost every kind of pain, no matter what the true cause.

The self-compassion born out of grieving makes it lucidly clear to us that we did not cause or deserve maltreatment – or the flashbacks it engenders. It helps us to interpret flashbacks as proof of our parents' culpability not ours, and to understand that when we are hurting it is because we were hurt, not because we are bad. This understanding then motivates us to be self-nurturing during flashbacks rather than self-attacking and self-abandoning.

When we become truly comfortable with grieving, we may even learn to welcome flashbacks as opportunities to cleanse ourselves of unresolved pain.

Flashbacks vividly demonstrate to us that much of what we struggle with in the present was learned, and is not innate. A myriad of flashbacks has helped me see that I was not born antagonistic to myself.

Recurring flashbacks also help me see that the habits of self-denigration are tenacious because they are acquired over a long period of time. This allows me to be more patient and sympathetic with the fact that recovery is sometimes painstakingly slow. It encourages me to continue striving for the gradual erosion of my perfectionism and for the ongoing acquisition of my adult rights. And now, since I have regained a great deal of my ability to be fully expressive and participatory in the world, my emotional flashbacks are rarer, milder, and easier to resolve.

GRIEVING DECREASES SOMATIZATION

The enforced incarceration of violent men often leads to a riot, and the private closeting of normal aggression often brings psychological rioting and outbursts of physical symptoms in the body.

– Jane Roberts

Trapped feelings are like birds in a cage, or a rabbit in a trap – they

try to get out any way they can. They peck at our heads and give us headaches. They scratch at our stomachs and make us hurt.

– Hazelden Meditations

Somatization is a process of the psyche that transforms accumulated emotional pain into physical symptoms and disease. It is now widely accepted that many physical illnesses have emotional causes. I even recently heard a prominent, macho sports announcer hypothesize that a newly acquired superstar's string of incapacitating injuries might be the result of his hurt feelings from not being welcomed by his new team.

There are varying theories about the mechanics of somatization. The simplest one posits that pain of any kind is a signal to the organism that something is awry and needs attention. If the individual continuously ignores his own signals of emotional distress, these signals intensify into physical pain in order to attract the attention they need for resolution. Renowned Jungian analyst Marion Woodman elaborates on this process:

The body has become the whipping post. If the person is anxious, the body is starved, gorged, drugged, intoxicated, forced to vomit, driven into exhaustion or driven to frenzied reactions of self-destruction. When this magnificent animal attempts to send up warning signals, it is silenced with pills. Many people listen to their cat more intelligently than they can listen to their own despised body. Because they attend to their pet in a cherishing way, it returns their love. Their body, however, may have to let out an earth-shattering scream in order to be heard at all.

Another theory further explains the mechanics of somatization by pointing out that the repression of emotion uses up so much vital energy that various bodily systems become depleted and more susceptible to breakdown and disease. Ken Wilber's description of this process is as follows:

Thus, if you are to suppress hostility . . . you must use some of your muscles to hold back the action of some of your other muscles. What results is a war of muscles. Half of your muscles struggle to discharge the hostility by striking out, while the other half strain to prevent just that. It's like stepping on the gas with one foot and the brake with the other. The conflict ends in a stalemate, but a very tense one, with large amounts of energy expended with a net movement of zero.

Somatization injures the body through a third dynamic: the chronic tightening of the body's musculature to avoid feeling. Muscular contraction against feeling is a physiological form of self-hatred. It is a vicious way of saying no to healthy aspects of the self. This clamping down

on the self not only depletes our overall energy level, but also restricts the blood supply to various parts of the body, making it more susceptible to disease. Many digestive disorders appear to be caused by the stifling of feelings through visceral contraction.

Effective grieving obviates somatization. It makes us increasingly healthy because it allows us to work through our emotional pain before it “somatizes” as physical problems. I have, to a large degree, reclaimed the old Irish custom of the “daily lament” and feel it contributes greatly to the fact that I am healthier and more alive as I approach fifty than I ever was in my twenties or thirties.

My emotional discomfort is an invaluable recovery tool. It attunes me to the unresolved pain of my childhood, so that I can grieve it out, just as physical discomfort directs my attention to a splinter so that I can pull it out.

Attending to my pain also informs me about its causes, aiding me to eliminate them. As the felt pain of the splinter teaches me not to run my hands down splintery banisters, so the felt pain of my childhood abuse teaches me to avoid those who behave in the hurtful ways of my parents (see “Repetition Compulsion” in [Chapter 7](#)).

GRIEVING OPENS THE DOOR TO PEACE AND RELIEF

*. . . Last night as I was sleeping I dreamt, marvelous illusion, that I
had a beehive here inside my heart. And the golden bees were making
white combs of sweet honey from all my old failures . . .*

– Antonio Machado

When we run from our emotional pain as if it is some demon that must be escaped, the demon grows larger as it ingests and is fueled by the everyday feelings that we shun. Whenever we slow down, hellish feelings prick our awareness. Everyday situations like waiting in line and being stuck in traffic provoke intense anxiety. Going to bed at night is so anxiety-provoking that we take sleeping pills, stay up “till all hours,” or drive our selves into profound exhaustion.

Anxiety is commonly the painful rumbling of feelings trying to surface out of the unconscious into an awareness trained to reject them. Anxiety is the tightening in the belly, chest, throat, and jaw that keeps our feelings under wraps. Ironically, this tightening so intensifies the distressfulness of a simple feeling that we experience it as astronomically more painful than it is in its unobstructed state.

Many survivors are constantly nervous and agitated. Before I learned how to grieve, my anxiety was so intense that I was a perpetual motion machine. If I had no structured activity to escape from my percolating emotional pain, I would unconsciously distract myself from it with endless fidgeting – toe-tapping to an inaudible, discordant inner rhythm. As adults we can free ourselves from this unnecessary anxiety. We can abdicate emotional repression. We no longer live in families that shame and punish us for displaying affect.

Grieving releases our emotional pain, both past and present, thereby dissolving anxiety. Anxiety is then largely relegated to a signaling function that alerts us if we slip back into emotional repression.

With sufficient grieving, we uncover the inborn sense of ease, “wellness,” and peace that

underlies our stress. Inner peace enhances our ability to enjoy solitude, leisure, and the company of others. Our sleeping improves and dreaming becomes a time of fun and enrichment, rather than a restless and disturbed thrashing-about in symbolic reenactments of childhood trauma. In the words of Shakespeare: “Now (our) my soul hath elbow room.”

The peace that comes from a good cry is quite distinct from the peace that comes from relaxation techniques or meditation. It is the most grounded and somatic peace available. Effective grieving bestows “the peace that surpasses understanding” – the realization that there is nothing inside us from which we need to run.

GRIEVING RESTORES THE HEART TO LOVE

Your task is not to seek for love, but merely to seek and find all of the barriers within yourself that you have built against it.

– Course of Miracles

*From the moment of time’s first-drawn breath,
Love resides in us,
A treasure locked into the heart’s hidden vault.*

– Bibi Hayati

Grieving is the key that unlocks the door to the love that is innate in our hearts. As grieving frees us from the childhood curse of being over-guarded in our self-expression, we are able to be more emotionally vulnerable with others. This breaks the spell of believing we have to be at our best to give and receive love.

Authentic communication makes us feel more alive. As we add emotional expression to our speech, conversations become more vital and enjoyable. Freedom in conversation often generalizes to other areas of our lives, encouraging us to be more free in our attitudes and actions. These freedoms enhance our enjoyment in life and make us increasingly loving people – of life, ourselves, and others. We also become easier to love when we model vulnerability, as our example encourages others to try on such freedom for themselves.

Vulnerability and authenticity are two of the golden pathways to intimacy. When two people are deeply and mutually self-disclosive, profound channels of emotionally substantive love open between them.

If we restrict the expressiveness of others to issues that are devoid of feeling, they will feel uncomfortable and unsafe around us. Moreover, if we remain tight-lipped about our own emotional experiences, then others will rarely feel they can show us their true feelings.

It is lucidly evident to me in every part of my being, especially in my heart and belly, that my best friends are those with whom I can authentically express my real feelings, and in whose company I can be regardless of my emotional state. Conversely, every cell of my being tightens and contracts at the mere thought of being emotionally vulnerable around people whom I know scoff at the expression of feelings.

What do you feel right now when you imagine yourself crying or being otherwise

vulnerable in front of your father – or in front of some acquaintance who routinely makes sarcastic jokes about people who feel sorry for themselves? What do you feel when you imagine yourself crying in front of Mother Teresa, the Mother Mary, or your best friend?

Grieving helps us brave our fears of intimacy and stimulates our desire to communicate and connect in emotionally loving ways. This is not to say that love is only an emotion; yet love is somewhat dry and unsatisfying when it is not grounded in feeling. In fact, many of us remain in unhealthy relationships – relationships based on an illusion of love – because we don't know what it feels like to be loved.

Until we experience love emotionally at the heart level, we cannot discern whether our partners are really loving us or only paying lip service to love. Many of us were conditioned by our parents to believe empty testimonies of love. “Of course I love you,” and “I am only doing this because I love you,” are cliches that many of us heard innumerable times in circumstances that were anything but loving.

CIRCUMNAVIGATING MY LONELINESS

Though we travel the world over to find the beautiful, we must carry it with us or we find it not.

– Ralph Waldo Emerson

When I finally escaped my family and the army, I went out *On The Road* as a *Dharma Bum* pursuing the adventures that Jack Kerouac described in the aforementioned novels. I was a self-proclaimed “loner” and proud of it, bent on finding meaning in life by emulating the hedonistic adventures and quasi-spiritual quests of the characters in these books. I spent six years as a dropout, and during that time I managed to elude any kind of commitment to career or relationship. I believed I would happily spend my whole life as a world traveller, until serendipitous factors opened me to my grief.

Grieving gradually brought me the unsettling understanding that I was running from myself, not rushing toward my greater destiny. My circling and recircling the globe had little to do with my pursuit of a life enriched by sensual and spiritual experience. What I was really doing was fleeing from my unacknowledged childhood pain, which was always hot on my heels. I needed constant stimulation and distraction to stay one step ahead of that molten core of inner hurt that threatened to swallow me up if I stayed anywhere too long.

As I continued to grieve I was shocked to feel how profoundly lonely I was and had always been. I had been so sure that I didn't need anybody. My tears revealed to me the awful misery of my loneliness. I was daunted by the realization that I had never spent a moment of true interpersonal comfort with anyone.

Over time, I began to understand that my “brave,” “noble,” “fearless” stance of world-traveling loner was little more than a defense against my unconscious terror of intimacy, and all the unfelt feelings it would stir up in me.

As my grieving and recovery work progressed, I discovered why I was so intimacy-phobic: becoming intimate with another would (and eventually did) unlock the prodigious hunger of all my unmet needs for love. I was unconsciously terrified that if anyone began to meet

those needs, I would begin to depend on them and end up needing them.

How could I break my vow of renouncing dependency? I had survived by refusing to need anybody. I had had a doctorate's worth of lessons in childhood convincing me that relying on others was foolishly inviting certain betrayal and heartbreak. Looking for love from people was looking for love in all the wrong places. Looking for love from people was as useless and painful as looking to cacti for bedding.

I dared not risk another disappointment around love. My heart was so full of unreleased emotional pain that I could not even wish for love. One more abandonment or betrayal and my heart would surely burst.

Happily, extensive grieving gradually released the painful pressure of thirty years of stifled hurt, and eventually allowed me to feel and identify with my natural desire to connect more intimately with others. I don't believe I would have been able to pursue this desire, however, if I had not also reconnected with my anger.

The anger that came up in my grieving helped me feel safe enough to risk being vulnerable with others. My reclaimed anger became the emotional foundation of the assertiveness work that taught me how to protect myself from people who were as unfair as my parents. Role-playing with anger helped restore me to a full ownership of my rights in relationship. This in turn helped me shift my attraction toward people who valued fairness and respect. Truly intimate relationships finally began to flower in my life.

Extensive grieving has convinced me that any interpersonal disappointment, past or present, can be healed by allowing its hurt to flow out through grieving. Nietzsche said: "Anything that does not kill us makes us stronger." I think that grieving is the alchemic process that makes this statement true.

In my experience, the broken heart that has been healed through grieving is stronger and more loving than the one that has never been injured. Every heartbreak of my life, including the brokenheartedness of my childhood, has left me a stronger, wiser, and more loving person than the one I was before I grieved.

Grieving allows me to continuously risk emotional involvement with the significant people and pursuits of my life because it always revives me from the pain of my losses. With each fully mourned loss, my ability to celebrate the gift of life grows stronger. I become even more convinced that I can risk loving again.

Grieving may never be fun, but with a practice that is free of shame and self-hatred, it becomes an increasingly negotiable process, and rewards us with an ever-increasing ability to love our lives and most of what is in them. Banished from my heart before I knew I had one, I found it later in the cabin I built for my first love:

*In time I lost her love
but found my own within my grief
And via tears and rage
created for her
an everlasting place within my heart*

My grief has saved a special room

for every love who has come and gone

*My heart is now a mansion
in a garden of great relief
My tears are springs
that irrigate the flowers of my soul
My rage a sun
that silently shines compassion
on every soul I get to know
and on all the children
who have no means
to flee parental hate
who cut their heartstrings
like trapped coyotes
gnawing off their legs
to gain escape.*

A GUIDED MEDITATION

Perhaps you have not realized that you have some semblance of the aforementioned mansion within your own heart. If it feels right, you might close your eyes and try to remember every person in your life you have loved or been loved by. Imagine that you are at a point in time when you have grieved and healed any hurt that may be obstructing the love you feel for those who are or have been special to you. It is time for a reunion, and you are on a summer beach around a campfire. One by one each of your beloveds comes towards you on a path of golden light laid down by the full moon upon the sea. Let them join you in a circle around the fire and feel the love expand inside your heart as you all reconnect, reflecting each to each your essential loveliness.

GRIEVING DIMINISHES DENIAL AND MINIMIZATION

If a person is able . . . to experience that he was never “loved” as a child for what he was, but for his achievements, success, and good qualities, and that he sacrificed his childhood for this “love,” . . . he will feel the desire to end this courtship. He will discover in himself a need to live according to his “true self” and no longer be forced to earn love, a love that at root, still leaves him empty-handed since it is given to the “false self.”

– Alice Miller

The term denial can be used in a broad sense to describe all the ways we protect our

illusions of having had a happy childhood, including the defense mechanisms described in [Chapter 6](#).

Minimization is a subset of denial; it is acknowledging, but making light of, childhood losses. Many survivors minimize hurtful childhood memories by transmuting their pain into jocularity. We tell stories of shocking parental cruelty as if they were tales of mirth. We sometimes laugh uproariously as we recount tragic stories of our parents' destructive rage or costly incompetence.

Inappropriate hysterical laughter is often the distorted expression of denied grief trying to obtain some kind of release. (This is not to dismiss the fact that laughter can help us release pain if we also grieve.)

Minimization also occurs when we flatly diminish the seriousness of our childhood hurts. This thwarts our recovery for as Freud discovered:

Recollection without affect almost invariably produces no results.

Here are some examples of minimization. As a ten-year-old, I told myself that I exaggerated my fall when my mother pushed me down the stairs. When she struck me with her arthritic hands, I customarily dismissed my hurt by comparing it to how it must have hurt her hands. Besides, I told myself: "She can't hit very hard with those hands." And after all, my pain was nothing compared to that of the crucified Christ, as the nuns had reminded me ad nauseam.

I have heard clients from "perfect" families minimize their childhood black eyes, nosebleeds, and bruises by saying they were only hit with an open hand. I have heard survivors laugh about having yardsticks broken over their bare buttock. I have seen acquaintances cringe in fear as their partners viciously lambasted them, and later heard them say: "It was nothing – really!"

Minimization is a way of acknowledging suffering, without really feeling it or its effects. The famous psychoanalyst Frieda Fromm-Reichman describes it thus:

It is frequently not the actual events and happenings in the previous lives of patients to which they have become oblivious but rather the emotional reactions accompanying these events or engendered by them.

Minimization also reflects the fact that denial has many layers or degrees to it. In the process of recovery, denial does not fall away in one fell swoop. As we regain a deeper and more accurate feeling sense of the negative effects of our upbringing, we gradually becomes less minimizing.

As with most of the growth processes of recovery, letting go of denial is usually a three-steps-forward, two-steps-back affair. When a particularly painful piece of the past threatens to reemerge into awareness, we may reflexively retreat temporarily into denial.

Survivors of extensive, ongoing abuse may need a lifetime to finish minimizing their childhood losses. I find that as I peel away more and more of my denial, I am increasingly

shocked at how profoundly hostile my early homelife was. Had I not been able to minimize my realization of this early on, I may have been too overwhelmed and incapacitated by the full impact of my trauma to continue the work of recovery. Minimization allows us to work through the layering of denial and childhood pain in manageable increments.

I will never forget my first visit home after an eleven-year absence overseas. I had only been involved in recovery work for a short time, and it was focused mainly on my father. I still adhered to the black-and-white illusion of my childhood that dad was the “bad guy,” and mom was the “good guy.” Consequently, I was shocked at my mother’s ongoing verbal abuse of my father. At every meal, she attacked almost everything he said with emotionally charged sarcasm or overtly hostile criticism.

For a few nights I lay awake wondering what had happened to the mother I remembered as being so nice. Finally, I had a nightmare about her in which I was flooded with forgotten memories of her caustically belittling me. When I awoke, layers of denial suddenly peeled away and all at once I realized that nothing had happened to her. She had not changed at all. She had always been cruel and vicious with her words. As I lay awake, I finally felt the sting of the innumerable cutting remarks she had jabbed me with throughout my childhood.

Much later, I realized that I was “ready” for this nightmare about my mother’s abusiveness because of the recovery work I did concerning my father. Grieving about his hurtfulness reduced my denial enough for me to begin seeing my mother more clearly.

Much later on, when I grasped the significance of my mother’s abuse more fully and grieved it sufficiently, my overall denial dissolved enough for me to begin recognizing how much I had suffered from both parents’ neglectfulness.

Grieving naturally erodes denial and rewards us with the information we need to identify and recover our childhood losses.

Here is another example of how denial works, and of how denied reality manifests in dreams. A client of mine recently shared this story with me about a visit from her dysfunctional mother. From the moment she arrived, Petra’s mother criticized almost everything she said or did, and ran a nonstop diatribe against other family members and “pet” societal targets. Mother was addicted to releasing her pain by dumping it on others in nonstop orations of misplaced blame.

Petra’s mother also fastidiously controlled her grandchild, but made enough of an effort to be nice to him that he looked forward to her visits. Because of his youth, his conscious mind was not yet capable of holding an ambivalent view of her. He needed to idealize her and push out of awareness (deny) the many hurtful scenes of grandma’s hostility to his mother.

Grandmother’s lambasting did not go unregistered, however. One morning Petra’s son came out of his bedroom visibly upset about a nightmare he’d just had. He told his mother:

I dreamed grandma had a big black cape on, and that when she opened it up there were all these big knives and tools for cutting up people.

He was especially distraught because he knew his grandma would never do such a thing. After comforting him, Petra realized she was quite stunned by the dream. When she

focused on how it reverberated in her, her minimization about her mother's viciousness eroded considerably.

This dream illustrates how denied hurtfulness does not disappear, but is repressed into the unconscious, where it may periodically reemerge into consciousness through nightmares and emotional flashbacks.

Many survivors experience their denial unraveling through upsetting dreams about their parents. These dreams may be accurate recordings or purely symbolic representations of childhood trauma. Whether they are literal or symbolic, or some combination of the two, these dreams commonly contain the old, undealt-with emotional pain that accompanied the original traumatic events. They provide the recoveree with powerful opportunities to dissolve denial and "grieve out" old pain.

The process of grieving the past commonly entails a series of painful encounters with the crumbling illusions of a happy childhood. Grieving sometimes uncovers bone-chilling memories that belie survival myths such as "My parents were always there for me" and "I had it really good compared to most people." Letting such illusions die is not easy. We not only need to "grieve out" the hurt buried beneath them but also mourn the loss of these once-cherished and previously valuable illusions.

A very significant erosion of my perfect-family illusion occurred the day I allowed myself to grieve the loss of my long-term best friend. He had relocated permanently to the other side of the world and I felt sick about it.

As I grieved Sat's leaving, I was astounded by the intensity of the pain I felt. Gone perhaps forever was the immediacy of our friendship. I grieved the loss of our deep mutual acceptance, our easy multidimensional communication, our rich history of shared activity and supportiveness, and suddenly I realized that he had cared for me in a way that was far outside the capacity of my parents. For the first time, I understood what authentic love was really about. Beside him, my parents felt and looked like strangers rather than allies. Their love was empty notions, not feelingful behaviors – tissue paper not wood.

GRIEVING ALLEVIATES FEAR AND SHAME

Man cannot remake himself without suffering. For he is both the marble and the sculptor.

– Alexis Canell

If we were continuously intimidated and humiliated in childhood, we may still suffer chronically from unnecessary fear and shame. Some of us are triggered into painful emotional flashbacks by the most innocuous everyday activities. Unexpected encounters with almost anyone can catapult us into private hells of unresolved fear and shame. Fear of fear leaves some of us housebound much of the time – too afraid or mortified to do anything in life beyond what is absolutely required.

When we are overwhelmed with fear or shame, we are in a deathlike state. Fear is the death of feeling safe in our bodies, as shame is the death of self-acceptance and self-worth. Fear and shame kill our enthusiasm for life.

Uncried tears and inverted anger trap our fear and shame inside us. Grieving naturally heals this condition. Effective grieving “rebirths” us out of the death-grip of fear and shame into feelings of safety and self-esteem. When we grieve out our anger in non-harmful ways, our inner infernos of fear and shame safely burn themselves out. Our tears of grieving can then extinguish their smouldering embers.

Grieving resolves fear and shame much more effectively than any of the traditional techniques of cognitive-behavioral therapy. I make this comparison because cognitive-behavioral therapy is the dominant mode of therapy in America today and it commonly dismisses, minimizes, and sometimes scorns the importance of the emotional causes of behavior.

Fear and shame are essentially emotional states, and although they often have significant cognitive components, they are ameliorated most effectively through the emoting processes of grieving.

Here is an example of this. I lived my life at a frenzied pace for decades. When I finally recognized the destructiveness of this habit and decided to change it, I discovered what I thought was the key obstacle to my slowing down: an inner voice that assaulted me with endless, strident variations of “Get off your ass, you lazy slob!” whenever I stopped or tried to rest.

I worked hard to turn off this inner voice in my early, pre-grieving years of therapy. I used cognitive techniques such as positive self-talk, thought-stopping, self-hypnosis, and systematic relaxation to silence this voice and reduce my driven behavior. Unhappily, these attempts only rewarded me with short-lived reprieves from my constant busyness.

It was not until I grieved extensively that I finally realized my self-attacking thoughts were secondary manifestations of a deeper, less conscious process. Grieving dropped me below the surface of thinking to discover many painful childhood memories of my parents denigrating me for not being perpetually productive.

Coexisting with these memories were enormous repositories of fear and shame – the fear and shame they instilled in me to drive me into constant striving. These unresolved family heirlooms left me unconsciously afraid that if I slowed down or rested, my parents, the nuns, or someone like them would hit, humiliate or scream at me as they had so often in my childhood.

Memorized internal refrains of “lazy slob” were verbal spurs that protected me from being caught dawdling. They helped me feel safe by keeping me on the move. Over time these goadings also served to keep me treading on my inner sea of fear and shame. Although I no longer needed to be busy to be safe as an adult, I kept moving because I unconsciously feared drowning in my emotional pain. I had not yet learned how to use grieving to drain my inner sea or become buoyant on it.

Thus, while I believed I was primarily victimized by old memorized criticisms, the undertow of excruciating feeling states was actually my principal tormentor. As the philosopher Nietzsche remarked:

Thoughts are the shadows of our feelings –
always darker, emptier, and simpler.

When feelings are not allowed to flow freely, they condense into stagnant quagmires of emotional suffering. Coalesced, unreleased misery blocks the inner light of our inborn self-love

and self-acceptance. It casts shadows of dark thought and simplistic all-or-none thinking into consciousness. My accumulated, “undealt-with” feelings from childhood were the primary generators of both my inner criticalness and my compulsive driven-ness.

If I may be allowed to mix the metaphor, it was as if there was an evil marshal in charge of my arrested feelings. He deputized my thought processes to keep me on the lam and to stop me from coming home to help my feelings escape. I remained a fugitive from peace until I learned to release emotional pain through grieving.

Now that I have released the bulk of my childhood pain, my compulsive busyness and destructive self-talk are almost non-existent and I feel relaxed much of the time.

I end this chapter with an important note about the limits of grieving. As absolutely essential as grieving is, it cannot replace the cognitive tasks of recovery. Positive thinking, willpower, self-affirmation, and compassionate self-understanding are also irreplaceable tools of recovery. They are only ineffective when used to supplant feelings or bypass the emotional tasks of recovery. They are most effective when catalyzed by grieving.

If you would like additional information on the gifts of grieving, the enlightening works of Elizabeth Kubler-Ross and Stephen Levine are excellent resources. Peter Leech and Zeva Singer’s book, *Acknowledgment*, is also a very accessible work on the power and value of grieving. Maya Angelou, the 1993 Inaugural Poet, has described this book, and by implication, the importance of grieving as follows:

*All living creatures
look upon death
with antipathy.*

*All living creatures
relishing possession
look upon loss
with antipathy.*

*Yet, if we live
we will die.
If we have,
we will lose.*

*Leech and Singer’s book
Acknowledgment
helps us to admit
helps us to feel, and to move on
from those two conditions
which inevitably beset
the human soul.*

5

THE FOUR ESSENTIAL PROCESSES OF GRIEVING

While they would very much like to know about these repressed feelings, they are loathe to encounter them in the flesh.

– Ken Wilber, *No Boundaries*

When we avoid the legitimate suffering that results from dealing with problems, we also avoid the growth that problems demand of us . . . let us teach our children the necessity for suffering and the value thereof.

– Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*

Many people tend to see grieving as the singular process of crying about loss or death. For grieving to be fully effective however, it must also include the processes of “angering,” verbal ventilation, and feeling.

This chapter describes healthy methods for actively and passively releasing unresolved childhood pain. The active resolution of emotional hurt comes from crying, “angering,” and talking about it. Passive resolution comes from simply focusing on and feeling the old hurts that are stored in our bodies.

CRYING

Pain is excess energy crying out for release.

– Gerald Heard

As the river loses its name and form when it enters the sea, so do humans lose their pain when it leaves them as tears.

– Paraphrase of a verse from the *Upanishads*

Crying is the healing release of pain through tears. Crying carries the energy of pain out of the body through the physical motions, sounds, and tears of weeping. Crying emotes our pain out in the true sense of the Latin derivative *emovere* which means “to move out.”

Unashamed crying creates deep, bodily-based feelings of peace and relaxation, as tears are the body’s most powerful way of releasing emotional tension. I have had dozens of experiences of defusing actively suicidal clients by “leading” them into their tears. On every occasion, their suicidal urges rapidly dissipated once they were able to release the overwhelming pressure of their pain through crying. I have only had to hospitalize one suicidally-active person under my care, and it was because I could not find a way to help him cry out his pain and deescalate his mounting sense of desperation.

Dr. William H. Frey, biochemist and director of the Dry Eye and Tear Research Center in St. Paul, Minnesota, thinks people feel better after crying because “they may be removing, in their tears, chemicals that build up during emotional stress.” His belief is based on the fact that scientists have known since 1957 that emotional tears are chemically different from those caused by eye irritation.

UPGRADING SELF-PITY INTO SELF-COMPASSION

*Each storm-soaked flower has a beautiful eye.
And this is the voice of the stone-cold creek:
“Only boys keep their cheeks dry.
Only boys are afraid to cry.
Men thank God for tears . . . ”*

– Vachel Lindsay

Real self-compassion is rare in our culture. Many of us have been brainwashed into believing that it is bad and self-indulgent to feel sorry (sorrow) for ourselves. In *Compassion & Self Hate* Theodore Rubin states: “In many quarters sorrow is regarded as a contagious and dirty condition.”

Natural, inborn empathy for ourselves is obliterated in childhood. Many of us had parents who routinely humiliated or punished us for crying. Can you remember being upbraided with any of these harsh remarks? “Stop feeling sorry for yourself!” “There are people who have it much worse than you do!” “You’re not a baby anymore. Only crybabies get upset about things like that!” “Who told you that life was going to be easy? Stop crying and get on with it!” “You look really ugly with that pitiful expression on your face!” “Grow up! . . . Snap out of it!”

When we are continually punished for crying, we eventually learn to reflexively repress sadness before it can well up as tears. We do this by holding our breath and tightening our belly, chest, throat, and face. This stops the natural motion of grief from rising up through the body into awareness where it can be released through crying.

Some survivors can cry but hate crying because it brings them more pain than relief. This is usually because they physically contract against their sadness as it is being released. When our tears have to force their way through our constricted bodies, crying becomes unnecessarily painful. I have seen a number of adult children, so heavily traumatized for crying in the past, that

they gagged, choked, and looked as if they were strangling when their sadness finally rose into their throats seeking release through the sounds of crying. Such struggling adds pain to crying that has little to do with the actual act of crying. This pain becomes associated with crying in a way that makes grieving seem very unappealing. This is another example of “the avoidable pain that comes from trying to avoid unavoidable pain.”

Fortunately, this pain is truly avoidable. When we learn to relax all the muscles we formerly contracted to hold in our tears, crying becomes a painless and profoundly relieving experience. When we first begin to completely relax into crying, our bodies sometimes shudder and tremble. This is the body’s way of letting go of years of chronic holding. Most survivors are frightened when this first occurs and immediately contract to stop it. However, it is extremely therapeutic to surrender to this trembling as it marks the release of the deepest levels of pain. On the other side of it, the griever will feel a tremendous sense of freedom and lightness in her body.

Many survivors also have difficulty letting sound come with their tears because they had to cry silently (if they were able to cry at all) to avoid being noticed by their parents. The most profound relief of crying, however, comes from letting the natural sounds of weeping come up from as deep a place in the body as possible. The Irish call this keening.

When I cry and let myself sob or wail, it feels to me as if my voice as well as my tears are carrying the hurt out of my body. I have also noticed a particular high pitched sound that sometimes spontaneously emerges in the process of wailing. When I allow this sound to reverberate through me, I often experience a very powerful release of fear. I have worked with many clients who have been amazed and delighted at how potently they can comfort themselves when they allow the natural sounds and motions of weeping to flow freely through them.

Many of us were made to feel guilty about crying by our churches, as well as by our families and the wider society. Many religions teach us that feeling sorrow for yourself is an awful sin rather than the healthy sacrament that it is. If you are Christian, you are encouraged to reclaim self-compassion by remembering that even Jesus felt sorry for himself. He modeled the positive side of self-pity when he wept in the garden of Gethsemane and when he cried out on the cross: “My God, my God, why has thou forsaken me?”

We all need to occasionally feel sorry for ourselves. Shedding tears for the self is one of the most potently healing experiences of recovery. Progress in recovery is usually extremely limited until there are genuine experiences of self-pity.

Self-pity does not have to be an all-or-none experience. While we have all met people who make self-pity look bad by feeling perpetually sorry for themselves, most of us go to the other extreme and tumble into self-loathing if we feel a moment’s sorrow for ourselves.

There is nothing in the world more soothing than a good unabashed cry about one’s troubles. Self-compassion is one of the most beautiful and restorative emotional experiences available to us. Had only our parents been able to hold us and soothe us when we cried, then maybe we would now be able to do the same for ourselves!

It is an indictment of our culture that we have no positive term for the healthy side of self-pity. We are praised as compassionate when we feel sorry for others, but there is no correspondingly laudatory term for feeling sorry for ourselves! Little wonder so many survivors routinely hurt themselves through the codependent practice of sacrificing their needs to the needs of others. Society’s taboo against self-compassion only allows us to care about the pain of others. The only comfort this offers us is the vicarious satisfaction of soothing others when they are hurting.

Unless the survivor feels unashamed sorrow for the child she was, she will never really understand the magnitude of what she lost. Crying for the inner child awakens a heartfelt desire to remother her and give her the unconditional love that she was denied but so eminently deserves.

You are invited to soothe yourself with this remothering technique. Imagine yourself back in the past tenderly comforting your inner child during the times he was hurt and yearning for parental comfort. Crying the uncried tears of your inner child brings healing to the terrible wound of childhood abandonment.

We need to resist the taunts of those who shame us for “whining” or “crying over spilt milk” whenever we express normal sadness about our own painful life experiences. We will only gain by refusing to accept the nonsense that it is good to feel sorry for others, but not for ourselves. Most of us must fight very hard to recover the right to cry about our own sorrows. This hard-won right must never be given up or “outgrown.” We must always reserve a special place in our hearts for ourselves when we are hurting. Let us take inspiration from this traditional Chippewa song:

*Sometimes I go about pitying myself,
and all the time
I am being carried by great winds across the sky.*

CRYING HEALS CATASTROPHIZING AND DRASTICIZING

*Let the young rain of tears come.
Let the calm hands of grief come.
It's not as evil as you think.*

– Rolf Jacobsen

The soul would have no rainbow had the eyes no tears.

– John Vance Cheney

Catastrophizing and drasticizing (terms that are part of an evolving recovery jargon) are forms of toxic shame that taint our thought processes with unfounded perceptions of dread and doom. Shame manifests as drasticizing when we view all aspects of our lives as awful and hopeless. When we are stuck in catastrophizing, we see everything in our present and future as deteriorating and irredeemable.

When I am in the grips of an emotional flashback, my catastrophizing tends to focus on physical symptoms and sometimes erupts in horrible “cancer-phobia.” On one occasion when I was suffering from allergies, I was darkly suspicious of almost every aspect of my life. My mind ran rampant for hours, drasticizing over a long list of possible causes:

It's my diet, and I have to change it radically; but how will I ever

figure out what to eliminate? There are so many different foods it could be. Or maybe it has nothing to do with food, maybe it's the plants in my room; oh God, I love those plants, but I guess I'd better get rid of them. Hmmm, it could be the plants in this entire area of the country – God, why did I ever move here? Maybe it's my intuition trying to get me to move before the big earthquake hits. Oh, I don't know! Maybe it's even worse than that – maybe it's some serious, undiagnosed medical condition; oh shit, I hope I haven't gotten respiratory cancer. I'm sure that place I worked in 1972 had asbestos ceilings. Wait a minute – these allergies are probably not physical at all. They're probably all psychological. I bet they're a message from my unconscious that I'm being too social, and I need to stay home more; no, it's actually the opposite – I'm not getting out enough and that's what's making me miserable. Yikes! Maybe it's just that I'm as screwed up as Stuart Smalley and Woody Allen put together. Or maybe I'm just "sick" of my job? . . . my routine? . . . my social circle? . . . my hobbies? . . . my partner? . . . myself? No! It's not that simple. It's not just one of them, it's probably some combination of all of them that I will never be able to figure out. I'll probably wind up blaming and getting rid of something that's actually good for me. I'll probably select some new remedy that makes me worse. Maybe it was that psychotherapy I did last year? Who am I kidding? It's that I didn't do enough psychotherapy. No, it's not that it wasn't enough, it was the wrong kind. Oh damn! Maybe I should just go with the flow . . . but aren't we supposed to create our own destiny?

And so on, and so on, ad nauseam, ad infinitum, et cetera. I believe this kind of excruciating self-torture is caused by denied emotional pain leaking into consciousness as tormented thinking. My unexpressed tears appear to be the fuel for this process, for when I shed my tears my pain flows out and this nasty psychic engine seems to run out of gas. I probably have had hundreds of experiences where crying has brought my catastrophizing to an immediate and blessed halt. I also see this happen almost daily with one client or another.

CRYING AND POSITIVE NOSTALGIA

*In tears your smile would glow forever.
Do not be afraid to suffer,
give the heaviness back to the weight of the earth;*

– Rilke

One of the sweetest gifts that I have received from opening to my tears is a moving recollection of the genuine good things in my past. This is quite distinct from the dry, lifeless

illusions and idealized memories that I used to invoke as part of my denial. This is the memory bank of childhood wonders that was buried beneath the host of traumas that I banished from awareness while growing up. On many occasions after deeply grieving these traumas, I have poignantly recalled special people, things, and events that kept my spirit alive in childhood.

It still sometimes astounds me that I can vividly picture every nuance of the area around my house, yet I remember very little about the decor of the kitchen I ate meals in for thirteen years. When I think of the inside of my house I experience an internal sense of darkness, but when I think of the neighborhood outside my breath deepens and I am infused with light.

Sweet tears of nostalgia brim up as I visualize my yard. As I allow my reverie, I smell the lilacs and honeysuckle on the back fence, and taste the drops of honey I would endlessly pull out of the base of the honeysuckle blossoms. By the west side of the house, I see the carpet of violets and lily of the valley showered by the pink and white petals exfoliating from the huge magnolia tree. I smell the fermenting apples and pears on the ground with the feathery heads of the dying dandelions dropping their parachute seeds among them.

I see my ball under the hydrangea bush and my best friends Dennis, Kenneth, and Johnny trying to retrieve it so we can get back to our umpteenth game of stickball in the street. How zestfully we played our various games of ball, especially on those glorious school-free days of summer! How endlessly we talked and played, creating an inexhaustible cornucopia of games and adventures! How we loved each other, sealing our passionate commitment to each other with a real blood brother ritual and an oath of eternal fidelity!

I am soothed from the past by the hope and nurturance I found outside my house from a tribe of friends, a very special teacher, a friend's mother who mothered me more than my own, and even one particular priest who confused me at the time by apparently seeing something good in me.

And there were even precious moments inside the house: good times with my sisters, with visiting relatives, and on occasion with my mother. Mom sometimes liked to laugh, and when it was not at our expense, there were times of exquisite hilarity.

How wonderful it has been to retrieve these and many other rich memories from childhood via the process of grieving and opening fully to my past.

ANGERING

Anger is an emotion bred into us by countless generations of evolution in order that our survival may be encouraged . . . Without our anger we would indeed be continually stepped on, until we were totally squashed and exterminated.

– Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*

Anger is probably the most maligned of all human emotions. It is repressed more than any other emotion. Its repression and inevitable emergence produces anxiety, I believe, more than any other psychological mechanism we engage in. This in turn makes for a host of symptoms, all of which are forms of rage at oneself or self-hate.

Despite cultural pressure and propaganda to the contrary, we human beings who are healthy enough to feel anything must generate anger many, many times in our life.

– Theodore Rubin, *Compassion & Self-Hate*

Angering is the gerund form of the verb anger; I use this term to describe the process of actively expressing anger in safe and healthy ways. Angering is as essential to effective grieving as crying. It allows the recoveree to release the part of his childhood pain that is an accumulation of unexpressed hostile feelings about parental injustice. Angering allows the energy of pain to be emoted (to be moved out of the body) through the sounds and bodily motions of expressing anger.

Many of us arrive in adulthood unconscious of the simmering furnaces of anger that lie buried inside us. Denied a direct and full release, this stored anger often smolders just below awareness causing us to chronically stew in resentment, cynicism, and self-hatred. It periodically flares out of some of us in hostile words and actions. Many survivors don't believe they have repressed anger, even when they have a molten core. Few of us remember the volcano that sometimes erupted out of us as infants and toddlers. Alice Miller elaborates on how that volcano became dormant:

If the patient had been able as a child to express his disappointment with his mother – to experience his rage and anger – he could have stayed alive. But that would have led to the loss of his mother's love, and that, for a child, is the same as death. So he "killed" his anger and with it a part of himself . . .

Violence is a key reason why many of us find it difficult to welcome anger back into our lives. Anger looks very ugly to us both because of our parents' violence toward us and because of the epidemic of senseless violence in our society today.

Our distaste for anger is further exacerbated by unpleasant encounters with our own anger. When anger is absolutely prohibited expression, we suffer from irritability – whether or not we show it. Moreover, our irritability inevitably erupts – if not in words or actions, then in aggressive thoughts. Many survivors abhor themselves because violent fantasies recurrently invade their consciousness.

We are also alienated from our anger because of the camouflaged violence that is so prevalent in the sarcasm and putdown of our social patter. There is great denial in our culture that words are sometimes deadly weapons. Some parents murder their children's self-esteem with incessant criticism alone. With enough verbal torture, a person can even be driven to kill himself or someone else. In a recent article in Parade Magazine, Andre Vachss confronts societal denial about verbal abuse:

It is as painful as physical assault, with a pain that can last a lifetime.
It leaves no visible marks, but it scars the heart and damages the soul.

Most of us are more verbally violent to ourselves than others. We chase our own tails, catch them, and tear them to shreds as we get angry at ourselves for being angry until we are infuriated with ourselves. In the effort to not be angry, we can violently rail against ourselves for hours or even days.

Sometimes the pressure of our repressed anger is so great that our unconscious longing for release causes us to become physically violent with ourselves. When we are consumed in inner tirades of self-hate, we are prone to unwittingly create painful “accidents.” Accidents are often violent and unconscious releases of anger against the self. When I “accidentally” smash my thumb with a hammer, I have an excuse to “scream bloody murder.” (Some accidents are of course accidental, as Freud implied when he said: “Sometimes a cigar is a cigar.”)

When our internal accumulations of anger become particularly unbearable, we are also prone to lash out with violent words or actions against others. Few of us have not suffered the dismay of seeing our repressed rage suddenly erupt in a scalding verbal attack on another. Who cannot remember a vicious slip of the tongue that hurt an intimate so profoundly that person’s trust in us was permanently injured?

These hurtful distortions of anger naturally sour us on our own anger. It is, in fact, healthy to feel bad and guilty about destructive displays of anger. It is not healthy, however, to conclude that this makes all anger bad and deserving of absolute renunciation. It is only because our families and culture offer us no models of healthy angering that we devolve into such destructive expressions of it.

We may continue to inadvertently hurt ourselves and our loved ones with unconscious angry behaviors if we do not renounce our renunciation of anger. Insignificant frustrations will periodically tip our cauldrons of repressed anger and the incendiary spills will flare out at others or scald us with burning self-hatred. The process of “acting out” and “acting in” anger leave us feeling so bad about ourselves that we redouble our efforts to permanently extinguish our anger, ignorant of the fact that we are merely reengaging the inflammatory repression-accumulation-explosion-guilt-repression cycle. How ironic that so much violence is caused by our sincere efforts to exterminate our violent impulses.

TECHNIQUES OF ANGERING

*Anger as soon as fed is dead;
'Tis starving makes it fat.*

– Emily Dickinson

*We must possess the capacity to express our anger in different ways.
At times, for instance, it is necessary to express it only after much
deliberation and self-evaluation. At other times it is more to our
benefit to express it immediately and spontaneously. Sometimes it is
best to express it coldly and calmly; at other times loudly and hotly.*

– Scott Peck

We can break the repression-accumulation-explosion-guilt-repression cycle that makes us victims of our own anger. We can befriend our anger and refuse to guiltily squelch it every time it arises. There are many safe, nonabusive techniques for releasing anger. They range along a continuum of intensity that gradates from thinking to writing to speaking to shouting to shadowboxing to pounding on pillows and finally to breaking expendable objects.

Sublimation falls somewhere in the middle of this continuum. It is the process of consciously channeling angry energy into playful or constructive activities, such as dancing, exercising, gardening, cleaning or chopping wood.

At some point in recovery, it is usually therapeutic to engage in the more dramatic activities of angering like screaming or hitting pillows. Most recoverees gradually work up to this and begin by simply “owning” and talking about their anger.

Angering unlocks our joy. When we finally end our lifelong repression of our anger, we often feel exuberant relief. Many of the participants in my anger-release workshops become noticeably lighthearted and jovial after engaging in the more intense techniques of angering. Those who rage as wholeheartedly as possible – who scream and allow anger to come fully into their voices – often end up laughing in delight.

I believe this is part of the reason why sporting events and pop concerts are so popular. These are the only two places in our culture where yelling is condoned, and joy often flows freely at these events.

The relatively harmless destruction of dispensable items is a potent anger-release technique that typically stimulates laughter and well-being. I have taught many survivors how to shred phone books by striking them with a two foot section of rubber hose. Many of my clients and students report great gains from using this technique, originally invented by Elizabeth Kubler-Ross.

I also teach this technique to children in family therapy, and all but the most traumatized have fun turning it into a game. Interestingly, this causes most parents to react as if their child is doing the exercise wrong; at such times, I try to help the parents see that the child is actually doing it right, that anger release naturally promotes joy, and that they might benefit from following the child’s example.

I have also used the hose and phonebook technique to de-escalate mounting hostility between children in my care by redirecting their underlying anger into this harmless release.

My first lessons in the value of harmless anger-release techniques were in the army! In three different places where I was stationed, bad feelings between individuals were often settled in safe fighting rituals. Antagonists donned “pugil equipment” (protective pads that cover all parts of the body) and attacked each other with five-foot long, foam-covered staffs. They typically fought to exhaustion, no one was ever hurt, relationships were usually mended, and there was a great deal of hilarity amongst both participants and observers. I believe these rituals were part of the reason why I never saw or even heard of a physical fight anywhere I was stationed in the army.

One of my favorite anger-release experiences occurred when my best friend Sat and I decided to smash the screen of my television set with an ax. My TV was awarded capital punishment because it had made the mistake of malfunctioning at a critical moment for the last time. The intense explosion and audacity of this act made us both laugh until we cried. It later became the impetus for us to design and lead the anger-release workshops mentioned above.

As exhilarating as killing the TV was, we were lucky not to get hurt, and along with

putting beans up your nose, I don't recommend the use of this method. The technique of smashing old dishes or bottles in a large plastic garbage can is much safer and can be almost as satisfying. It is, however, a good idea to use protective eye wear while so doing.

It is sometimes easier to recover anger than tears. If the survivor truly wants to reclaim her anger, continued practice of angering techniques will in most cases eventually fire her up enough to genuinely become angry. Several of my clients made this breakthrough by smashing bottles in the bins at a recycling center; others broke through while chopping wood, and many stumbled into their genuine anger via the more "traditional" methods of hitting a pillow with a fist, tennis racket, or plastic bat.

I often wish that there was some comparable way to force tears. Many survivors who truly want to cry find their tears very hard to come by. In early recovery, I spent long frustrating periods aching for the relief I knew crying would bring if only I could get my tears to flow. At one point I visited the airport whenever I was particularly desperate for a crying-release, for I had discovered that other people's tearful reunions often moved me to tears. One friend of mine, who shared this longing for tears, became so desperate that he tried squeezing onion juice into his eyes to force himself to cry. He only tried this once, however, and does not give it any kind of a recommendation.

The poet Rumi, in his poem *The Rights of Crying*, expressed a similar desperate yearning for tears:

*Why so fugitive? I have some right
to be with you, rights of crying.*

*If there were laughter all around me,
I would feel closed in if you weren't there.
With my children and everyone else I love,
I'd still be distracted.*

*How can I tie down one of your feet?
I do have enough strength and patience.
No matter how far you go, even
beyond the sunlight into where Jesus is visible,
I'll come and wait to be told why you go away from me.*

Although most of us can't force our tears, many of us can sometimes coax them with poignant movies and music. I have also helped my clients to begin crying with the method described later in this chapter in the section entitled: "A technique to enhance feeling."

ANGERING BUILDS CONFIDENCE

If only we would let ourselves be dominated as things do by some

intense storm, we would become strong too . . .

– Rainer Maria Rilke

A good anger acted upon is beautiful as lightning and swift with power. A good anger swallowed clots the blood like slime.

– Marge Piercy

*With zigzag lightning darting from the ends of my feet I step,
With zigzag lightning streaming out from my knees I step,
With zigzag lightning streaming from the tip of my tongue I speak
. . . Black obsidian and zigzag lightning streams out from me in four
ways,
Where they strike the earth, bad things, bad talk does not like it.*

– Navajo prayer

Angering builds confidence. Many of my clients do not achieve any substantial gains in real-world assertiveness until they do anger-release work in their therapy. In my own life, anger work has helped me many times to break through my fear and take the risks essential to my ongoing personal development.

My most powerful experience of this was overcoming my terror of public speaking. Jumping out of an airplane, intervening in a mugging, and patrolling ambush country in the Korean DMZ were nowhere near as fearsome as lecturing was for me. Unlike the former, the latter literally “scared the shit out of me.” For years, I could not get up in front of an audience without three trips to the bathroom in the half hour before I spoke.

Positive self-talk, hypnotism, and meditation did little to alleviate this condition. My terror at the lectern did not begin to abate until I applied anger work to this problem.

I began by fully feeling and exploring my fear. I was shocked to discover barely conscious fantasies of audience members attacking me in the exact same ways my parents had. Behind these fantasies were fearful images of my parents suddenly appearing in the audience to “knock me off my high horse.”

It shook me that my fear of my parents was by far my greatest dread. How could I still be terrified of them? They were so enfeebled now I could effortlessly repel any attack by them. And then I remembered that I had seen men the size of professional football players quaking in their boots around their verbally abusive, frail, and aged mothers.

Grounded in real possibility or not, these fears were powerfully real in my body, and the bottom line source of my misery around lecturing. To counter these fears, I experimented with my discovery that my fear often spontaneously dissipated when I was angry. Just before my lectures, I “role-played” defending myself against anyone who might attack me while I was teaching.

My first experiments with this were quite basic. When my fear produced images of my parents smacking me in the face because they didn’t like what I was saying (a recurring occurrence in childhood), I summoned up my anger and shadowboxed them off the stage. In the process, I reminded my inner child of my promise that no one would ever be allowed to hit him

again without me physically resisting them.

(I have reread this recounting three different times now, and each time that last sentence stimulates me to cry the most beautiful tears of relief and gratitude for all the gains that have come from my recovered willingness to defend myself.)

Angry role-plays of fighting off my parents eventually evolved into a more realistic plan for defending myself against frightening outcomes that were more possible. Alongside the fear of being hit, lived the fear of being verbally attacked and humiliated. That was bound to happen sooner or later, and what in the world would I do in that terrifying moment?

As I focused on this fear I heard the inner echoings of my parents' belittling sarcasm, and I decided to let myself shout back angrily at them. During this angering it suddenly dawned on me, in a uniquely illuminating and empowering way, that I had the right to insist on respect any and every time I was giving a lecture. It was my lecture. I was the person in charge. I had the right to determine who could be in the audience. I had the power to ask anyone to leave who became unreasonably argumentative, disruptive or abusive. I could, in fact, insist on it in a calm and reasonable voice. I could offer individuals their money back should they protest that they had paid and had the right to remain. If they continued to make a fuss and refused to leave, I could declare a fifteen intermission to avoid the discomfort of dealing with them in front of an audience. I could then deal with the disruption more privately and even call for police assistance if they would not immediately leave.

A year of using various versions of this process gradually reduced my fear of public speaking to the point that I no longer have anxiety attacks before my lectures. Now, I find many years later that I have been so successful at establishing a sense of safety around teaching that I am almost fearless about public speaking; so much so that I occasionally miss the adrenaline release of those old anxiety attacks which I was sometimes able to use to energize my talks.

Unless we reclaim our healthy anger, we may remain paralyzed by past fears that can no longer hurt us. Angering invokes the courage necessary to liberate our full self-expression. It removes the gag of emotional flashbacks that silence us with the specter of being smashed down for speaking out as in childhood. (*Feel The Fear And Do It Anyway* by Susan Jeffers is an excellent book offering practical encouragement on how to remain resolved in the face of fear.)

When survivors become proficient at angering, they are less likely to become walking land mines of anger. Angering safely releases and resolves the underlying rage that causes life-spoiling moods and behaviors.

TEMPORARY SPLITTING INTO ANGER AIDS RECOVERY

The paradise of pre-ambivalent harmony, for which so many patients hope, is unattainable. But the experience of one's own truth, and the post-ambivalent knowledge of it, makes it possible to return to one's own world of feelings at an adult level – without paradise, but with an ability to mourn.

– Alice Miller

At certain points in emotional recovery, many survivors feel rage toward their parents.

When denial sufficiently crumbles, survivors commonly split off from an unambivalent, idealized love of their parents into temporary feelings of hate. This split, which some therapists liken to a divorce (see Bob Hoffman's *Getting Divorced From Mother And Dad*), helps survivors to recover from inherited childhood limitations that are still hampering them.

If we never challenge the absolute loyalty our parents demanded, we never see how impaired we are by the hypercritical view of ourselves that we inherited from them. It is very difficult to recognize and renounce our parents' destructive judgments and beliefs about us without the help of temporary emotional distance. Extended periods of feeling alienated from them gives us the time we need to break the habit of self-deprecation, and to replace it with the habit of self-support. Splitting off into anger helps us to both work through our accumulated rage and also protects our unfolding self-expressiveness from our parents' censoring.

In the work of rescuing ourselves from stultifying parental influences, we may experience a series of polarized splits back and forth between loving and hating them. We may have numerous oscillations between the pole of reembracing denial and unambivalent love, and the pole of feeling consumed by reserves of rage that have not yet been sufficiently diminished.

As grieving progresses, our splitting generally becomes less dramatic and we eventually come to genuinely love our parents without having to idealize them. We have room in our psyches for normal ongoing fluctuations in feeling loving or angry toward them.

However, if the survivor's parents were or are inordinately dysfunctional, she may not return to loving them – even when she works through the bulk of her anger toward them. Some survivors are shocked to discover that there never was any real substance to the love they thought they felt for their parents. It is not humanly possible to love someone who is a constant source of hurt. In such cases, splitting is truly like a divorce, for just as a divorce rescues a spouse from an abusive marriage, splitting sometimes propels survivors into an understanding that they must totally disconnect from their still-perpetrating parents.

VERBAL VENTILATION

*Give sorrow words; the grief that does not speak
Whispers up the ove'r fraught heart, and bids it break.*

– Shakespeare

*Held back unvoiced, grief bruises the heart:
Not reaching the river, a raindrop is swallowed by the dust . . .
Travel far enough into sorrow, tears turn into sighing;
In this way we learn how water can die into air.*

– Ghalib

Verbal ventilation occurs when language is charged with feeling. Verbal ventilation is the grieving process of releasing pain by talking or writing about it. It is one of the primary healing processes of most formal psychotherapy. Robert Bly writes eloquently about this:

The growth of a man can be imagined as a power that gradually expands downward: the voice expands downward into the open vowels that carry emotion, and into the rough consonants that are like gates holding that water; the hurt feelings expand downward into compassion.

We release the pressure of old childhood pain by talking about the thoughts, feelings, sensations, images, and memories that arise when we contemplate our past in an uncensored manner. When we air out our grief by talking about it, verbal ventilation dissipates our anger and evaporates our sadness. This occurs most potently when we allow ourselves to feel our emotions as we are talking, and to cry or express anger as we speak.

Verbal ventilation is helpful to the degree that the listener is nonjudgmental and compassionate. True intimates can grieve together. In many nonindustrialized cultures, friends routinely commiserate with each other. They do not need therapists to find a safe place to ventilate.

Many survivors begin to outgrow their need for therapy when they establish at least one mutually commiserative relationship in their lives. Those who recover the ability to verbally ventilate feel no shame about crying on a friend's shoulder or having a friend cry on theirs. They are happy for such opportunities because they have experienced the profound deepening of warmth and connectedness that results from mutual verbal ventilation.

There are unfortunately many occasions when we have no one with whom to commiserate. At such times we can ventilate aloud without a listener. All children naturally do this as a self-soothing behavior until it is shamed out of them. It is an instinct worth reclaiming, but it is best to do so in private lest you be mistaken for someone who needs psychiatric hospitalization.

We can also verbally ventilate by singing emotional songs. I once heard the famous blues singer Maria Muldaur say in an interview:

I love singing the blues. I start out in some very uncomfortable feelings, but by the end of the song I feel like I have somehow resolved them.

Writing is also a powerful tool for verbal ventilation. I have had many experiences of working through painful feelings by freely and uninhibitedly writing about them. This works particularly well for me with depression. At such times I record all the impressions that come into my mind as I fully focus on my gloom. Before long I usually uncover something I am sad or mad about, but have ignored via slipping back into my old habit of repression. When I then grieve out these feelings, my depression typically lifts.

Many survivors derive enormous benefits from keeping a journal of their experiences and discoveries on the path of recovery. *Journaltherapy* is a term I sometimes use to describe the healing power of writing. Rachel Ballon, a psychotherapist who specializes in the therapeutic use of writing, proclaims:

Something mystical and magical happens when writing about it (a problem). The power of the pen knows no bounds. Through writing, people bypass their constant head chatter and the rationalization that occurs in talking. Writing touches the unconscious in a way that talking does not. It gets beyond the old, to the truth of the real stories within.

I would like to encourage you to keep a recovery journal. You can use it to vent feelings, record dreams, dialogue with your inner child, affirm yourself, and inscribe helpful advice gleaned from books, friends, teachers, and meditation.

It is also therapeutic to record jokes, anecdotes, and incidents that make you laugh. These can serve as heartening reminders of the joys of life during bleak times. For the same reason, I like to paste a picture on each page of my journal of something beautiful, moving, or otherwise significant to me. I have been doing this for over twenty years and have assembled a three-foot high stack of large journals. Paging through them often elicits in me a rich luxuriance of feelings: nostalgia, gratitude, awe, well-being, pride, and aesthetic appreciation.

Journal writing is a self-nurturing way of spending time alone. It accesses our intuition, aiding us to make wise decisions and realistic plans about our lives. It also helps us to unearth our innate but dormant passions and interests.

Cursing and swearing are very powerful forms of verbal ventilation, particularly for individuals whose speech is not carelessly littered with expletives. When profanity is not overused or used abusively, it is a very helpful angering tool.

Every so often I am tickled to see previously demure clients discover the therapeutic value of cursing. Usually it happens quite spontaneously while they are engaged in an angering exercise. Suddenly they tap into real anger and expletives gush out of them like some rich oil. Immediately after, they typically display an endearing mixture of shock, relief, mirth, and mild mortification. Delight usually overpowers embarrassment as I negate the necessity of an apology, normalize their behavior, and congratulate them on their discovery of this helpful tool.

FULLY EMOTING

Whether we try to ignore or make light of it, our grief, like a ton of feathers or a ton of rocks, is all the same to us. This much is sure: if we lock our grief in, it will weigh more on us and lengthen out; if we open our hearts with weeping and words, others will help carry it.

– Hazelden Meditations

The most powerful healing of the past comes when we cry, rage, and verbally ventilate at the same time. Young children, whose emotional self-expression is still unharmed, *fully emote* instinctively to rebirth themselves out of such mini-deaths as getting hurt or losing something of value.

You can usually observe a toddler fully emoting any day of the week on a well-used

playground. A typical scenario is as follows. A child runs past a sandbox, trips, falls, and hurts his knee. His experience of feeling carefree and joyful momentarily dies. He jumps up crying out his pain with sobs and tears. He looks at the ground and releases his anger about his pain through angry verbalizing: “Stupid ground! Dumb old ground! I hate you ground!” This brief and dramatic emoting fully releases his pain (unless he is seriously injured) and he runs off again, reborn to exult in the joy of playing.

You may also see a different, not so miraculous, version of this scene on the same playground. The exact same accident happens to a child of the same age who is in the “care” of a dysfunctional parent. As the child rises crying from his fall, his father screams at him: “Stop blubbering you little pansy! That didn’t hurt! Knock off that whining or I’ll really give you something to cry about!” The child stops crying, turns to the ground, and emotes his anger out just like the child cited above. Dad comes over just as upset: “What the hell’s wrong with you, you clumsy little jerk? You’re the stupid one, not the ground. Just sit still if you can’t manage to run around without falling down.”

And sit he will. Unlike the other child who easily bounced back from his accident, he may sit there contracted in fear and shame for the rest of the afternoon trying to keep his tears and anger under wraps.

Did anything like that ever happen to you? Maybe you have no visual memory of it, but perhaps there is anxiety or emotion stirring in your body now as you contemplate such a scene. Perhaps the natural anger and tears of some of your old injuries and mishaps are still locked inside you longing for some release. Will you give yourself permission now to grieve for the myriad times you were not allowed to emote the pain of some mini-death? You may find on the other side of that anger and sadness a reemergence of your indestructible urge to vibrantly express yourself and play with full abandon.

The quantum leaps that I sometimes witness in other people’s recovery often involve processes of fully emoting. Sessions in which clients remember a past injustice, cry and rage about it, and voice the just complaints they were never allowed to utter are the ones that motivate them the most to make life-altering changes in their lives.

Finally, a more primitive and equally powerful version of fully emoting occurs when an individual cries and rages at the same time. The first time I experienced this I had to stop abruptly because I thought I heard a baby howling in the room. How shocked I was to suddenly realize that it was my voice howling out grief in a pure, primordial way. My voice carried the blended cathartic sound that infants make when they are extremely upset and rage and cry simultaneously. I truly cherish my few experiences of this depth of grieving. These experiences revitalized me in ways that were truly transcendent.

As I write this I muse about certain friends’ reports that they feel deeply moved when they hear a coyote howl, or when they allow themselves to howl wholeheartedly like a wolf. Perhaps such howling is a pristine form of grieving.

*The last of the light of the sun
That had died in the west
Still lived for one song more
In a thrush’s breast.
Far in the pillared dark*

*Thrush music went –
Almost like a call to come in
To the dark and lament.*

– Robert Frost

FEELING

Do you have the patience to wait till your mud settles and the water is clear? Can you remain unmoving till the right action arises by itself? The Master doesn't seek fulfillment. Not seeking, not expecting, she is present, and can welcome all things.

– Lao Tzu

Feeling is the antithesis of pain . . . the more pain one feels, the less pain one suffers.

– Arthur Janov

Feeling is the process of grieving that allows a survivor to work through childhood pain in a passive way. Feeling is focusing on pain with the intention of relaxing any resistance to it, so that it may pass through and out of the body. Feeling is the reversal of the learned survival mechanism of clamping down on pain and banishing it from awareness.

Feeling contrasts with emoting which is the process of offering pain an active expression and release through crying, angering, or verbally ventilating. Feeling and emoting are opposite but equally important processes in grieving.

Feeling is different from emoting in that it is the process of quietly experiencing an emotion. Feeling is a receptive, “yin” experience while emoting is an active, “yang” experience. Feeling occurs when awareness is fully focused inwardly on an emotional state with the intention of accepting it and letting it be.

In its purest form, feeling is the process of paying non-thinking, non-interfering attention to the emotional state of the body. When I am releasing my hurt through feeling it, my awareness seems to be a solvent in which my emotional pain is gradually dissolving.

Feeling can also be described as a meditative merging with the noncognitive parts of inner experience. The Buddhist tradition of *vipassana* includes many practices that focus awareness on fully feeling. The renowned meditation teacher and psychotherapist, Jack Kornfield, describes a Buddhist approach to feeling in his excellent book *A Path With Heart*:

Feelings can move through us like the changing weather, and we can be free to feel them and move on like the wind . . . “Free” is not free of feelings, but free to feel each one and let it move on, unafraid of the movement of life.

Feeling involves the direction of attention to the internal experiences in the body below the realm of thinking. Feeling experiences are often accompanied by physical sensations in the heart area or in the “guts.” Feeling is a kinesthetic rather than a cognitive experience. It customarily takes place in the viscera and not in the head. As my editor says: “Feelings melt in your heart – not in your head.”

Feeling an emotion can be likened to slowly digesting it. When we relax into a feeling, we can gently absorb it into our experience. This is very similar to the way we digest food. To the degree that the alimentary canal is relaxed, to that degree do we effectively assimilate our nutrients. Unfortunately, many of us habitually contract our visceral muscles around the sensations that accompany our feelings. I believe this physiological correlate of emotional repression is the cause of many digestive disorders.

The processes of feeling and emoting are complementary, and both are necessary for grieving to be fully effective. Many philosophical approaches to resolving emotional pain are incomplete because they exclude either the feeling or emoting part of grieving.

Many exponents of meditation believe that feeling alone can resolve all inner pain. In my experience, however, this does not seem to be true. Some feelings are so intense that they require the active emoting of anger and tears for resolution. No amount of feeling passively sad or angry can fully process the years of accumulated hurt of a wretched childhood.

At the other extreme, approaches like primal scream therapy attempt to resolve past pain simply through raw emoting. Instead of spending time silently feeling her emotions, the “primal screamer” immediately purges them through catharsis. This tends to create a belief that feelings are so bad and awful that they must be emptied out as soon as possible.

We can enhance our ability to feel by directing our attention lovingly to our emotional experiences. This can be done in the same manner that a functional parent tenderly holds and soothes a hurt child. This practice rescues the inner child from the belief she does not deserve company, support, or compassion when she is hurting.

A balanced approach to grieving includes an openness to feeling emotions as well as emoting feelings. If we do not accept and value both processes, we will not become fully feeling human beings.

A TECHNIQUE TO ENHANCE FEELING

If you have butterflies in your stomach, invite them into your heart.

– Cooper Edens

You can use the following technique to begin or to enhance the practice of feeling. Begin by closing your eyes. Focus your full attention on the sensations in the area of your belly and heart. Breathe slowly, deeply, and rhythmically and simply attend to your visceral experience as you are filled and emptied by each breath. Attend to the expansions and contractions of the muscles that allow you to fully receive and fully release your breath. Focus on the most dominant sensation that appears in your torso during this process.

Visceral sensations are often physiological correlates of feeling. If you hold your attention on them, if you feel them, you may become aware of their actual emotional content. By holding

your awareness on a sensation, its accompanying feeling either gradually dissolves and passes through you, or it intensifies and wells up strongly enough to be emoted. Such focusing may also bring up painful childhood memories of events that occurred when these sensations and feelings were originally stored in your body. Any pain that surfaces with such memories can be worked through either by feeling it or by emoting it.

FEELING AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

If the power to think is a remarkable gift, the power not to think is even more so.

– Sri Aurobindo

Thoughts, rest your wings. Here is a hollow of silence, in which to hatch your dreams.

– Joan Walsh Anglund

The compartments we create to shield us from what we fear, ignore, and exclude exact their toll later in life. Periods of holiness and spiritual fervor can later alternate with opposite extremes – bingeing on food, sex, and other things – becoming a kind of spiritual bulimia. Spiritual practice will not save us from suffering and confusion, it only allows us to understand that avoidance of pain does not help.

– Jack Kornfield

The practice of feeling has taught me that there is absolutely nothing inside myself from which I need to run. There is no thought, energy, feeling, picture, sensation or memory that I need to shame, hate, or fear. Persistent passive focusing on any internal phenomena leads to its eventual integration and resolution in consciousness, as many seasoned meditators know.

Perhaps the greatest freedom attainable is that which is born out of a consistent willingness to stay lovingly and acceptingly present to whatever unfolds inside oneself. Such practice sometimes graces us with an enlightening experience of understanding and accepting all our existential predicaments.

Zen Buddhists call such an experience *satori*. Satori illuminates consciousness in unimaginably uplifting and transformative ways. Satori fills us with an unshakable belief that all that has been and all that is occurring is exactly and perfectly as it should be. It infuses us with a purposefulness that deeply soothes the despairing sense of meaninglessness that may have plagued us since childhood. It assuages our lingering childhood feelings of loneliness and alienation. It rocks us with such a scintillating sense of being cared for that we feel perfectly placed in the exquisite web of loving interconnectedness that unites all things.

And while the potency of satori is temporary and gradually wanes, it usually leaves us permanently transformed on many levels. It makes experiences of deep peace increasingly

accessible. It enhances our capacity to feel and gradually opens our awareness to subtleties and varieties of feeling that are exquisite. There are infinite and wondrous worlds of experience inside us that are more daunting and rewarding than any external experience imaginable. The mystic-poet, Rumi, captures this in the following two poems.

*I am a naked man standing inside a mine of rubies,
clothed in red silk.
I absorb the shining and now I see the ocean,
billions of simultaneous motions
moving in me.
A circle of lovely, quiet people becomes the ring on my finger.*

/ / /

*“Lo, I am with you always,” means when you look for God,
God is in the look of your eyes,
in the thought of looking, nearer to you than your self,
or things that have happened to you.
There’s no need to go outside.
Be melting snow.
Wash yourself of yourself.*

*A white flower grows in the quietness.
Let your tongue become that flower.*

The process of feeling helps dissolve the pain and unresolved grief that blocks our access to archetypal human experiences of great expansiveness. The reader is once again referred to Kornfield’s book for guidance on cultivating inner peace and expansion through a nonreactive approach to feeling. In this light he states:

It is the feeling level that controls most of our inner life . . . When pleasant feelings arise and we automatically grasp them, or when unpleasant feelings arise and we try to avoid them, we set up a chain reaction of entanglement and suffering. This perpetuates the body of fear.

HOW REASON CIRCUMVENTS GRIEVING

The logical mind is as poor a solvent for feelings as oil is for water.

– Jim Dowe

The time will come naturally when he will find himself . . . holding the ashy hand of the Lord of Death or the Lord of Divorce. He will find himself noticing the tears inside brooms or old boards . . . He will realize how much he has already lost in the reasonable way he chose to live, and how much he could easily lose in the next week.

– Robert Bly

The rational mind can be a tremendous obstacle to recovery. When its logic and reason are enlisted in the service of denial, the thinking mind finds innumerable reasons and ways to short-circuit the grieving process.

Americans are very practiced at convincing themselves that their pain should be dismissed. They routinely trivialize and dismiss their hurts and losses by comparing them to the more dramatic misfortunes of others. Starving children and homeless people are routinely invoked as reasons for disavowing painful feelings.

We are also commonly talked out of our pain by being told how much worse we could have it. When my head was split open in a rock fight as a child, my mother scolded me for feeling sorry for myself: “Be grateful you only need stitches and that your skull isn’t cracked!” In a recent commercial for a health plan, the hospitalized patient extolled her caretakers as compassionate because they reminded her how lucky she was that her broken neck hadn’t left her a paraplegic.

Using comparisons to rationalize pain away is like ignoring termites in the back porch because the unfortunate neighbors have termites throughout their whole foundation. When pain is ignored because it does not register high enough on the Richter scale of compassion, it does not magically resolve itself. Banished from awareness, it works away destructively in the unconscious as do the termites in the ignored porch.

There are many other ways of silencing grief that pass unchallenged as conventional wisdom. Men typically favor bypassing statements like: “Dwelling on it only makes it worse – think about skiing or vacationing in Hawaii!” Codependent women prefer statements like: “Do something to help someone who is worse off than you!” And most of us automatically salute the hallowed American “bootstraps” panacea: “Don’t wallow! Occupy yourself with something productive.”

Many of us automatically recite these homilies to ourselves in times of pain and, with the best intentions, pass the same injurious advice on to others. Unfortunately, this advice is hard to challenge because it sounds so rational. Yet it is nothing less than the destructive tyranny of logic over feeling, mind over soul. Richard Eberhart describes his losses from this tyranny in his poem *The Groundhog*:

*But the year had lost its meaning,
And in intellectual chains
I lost both love and loathing,
Mured up in a wall of wisdom.*

Anger is probably rationalized away more than any other emotion. We routinely dismiss our anger with logical homilies: “It’s stupid to let yourself get riled up about minor frustrations!” “Getting angry never solved anything.” “You can’t get mad at that, you do it too!” “If I got upset about every little injustice, I’d spend my whole life being pissed off.” Ironically, we do spend our whole lives unconsciously roiling in anger when we habitually repress our anger.

Even essentially fair statements such as “I didn’t hurt you on purpose!” and “It was an accident and nobody is to blame!” are damaging when they coax us into flatly dismissing our anger. It is not that these statements are inherently harmful or unworthy of eventual consideration, but when they are reflexively uttered at the first sign of anger, they rob us of opportunities to harmlessly vent our anger.

We do great disservice to our friends when we goad them to “be sensible” when they are harmlessly angering. Loving people allow and even encourage their friends to express and release their anger, as long as they are not abusive in the process. George Bach and Herb Goldberg elaborate on this notion:

Authentic trust and security cannot be established with another person unless one first knows what a person does with his aggression, specifically his anger, frustrations, and resentments. The ever-sweet, ever-smiling, essentially passive person is particularly one who cannot be genuinely trusted because we believe he is behaving in a humanly unreal way . . . we (instinctively) feel that the person who will openly complain and confront is safer, more real, and more to be trusted than the neighbor who pretends to be accepting of everything.

I am often struck by the irony that our ability to respond rationally to distressful situations is often hampered by prematurely analyzing our angry feelings. When I encourage my friends or clients to first vent their feelings about a frustration, they eventually respond more sensibly and effectively than when they merely apply deduction to their problem.

No matter how unreasonable our anger may seem, we hurt ourselves by denying real experiences of it. If I am angry, I am angry. Denying that I am “worked up” because I prefer feeling mellow is like denying that it’s raining because I prefer sunshine. Pretending it isn’t raining leaves me soaking wet, just as smothering my anger leaves me smoldering.

Many of my most significant experiences in early recovery came from accepting my therapist’s invitation to fully explore upsets that I initially tried to dismiss as trivial and senseless. At such times, she encouraged me to allow my unconscious to bring forth images and memories of everything that was bothering me. I soon discovered that my anger rarely “belonged” to what first aroused it. My minor upsets were almost invariably clues to my unresolved childhood pain. When I allowed myself to vent on these occasions, my anger frequently and spontaneously turned toward long forgotten abuses that resembled my current upset in a much more onerous way.

(This technique is a variation of *free association*, the therapeutic process of inviting and expressing all the thoughts and feelings that spontaneously come to mind while contemplating an upsetting experience.)

Over time, this technique of venting helped me remember and work through a great deal of my old repressed rage. One instance of this occurred when I linked my annoyance with a friend's tardiness to a forgotten childhood trauma. I suddenly remembered an occasion when my parents severely punished me for being one minute late, without allowing me to explain that I was delayed because I had stopped to help an elderly woman put out a fire under the hood of her car. My restimulated anger about this injustice then triggered a host of angry memories about my parents' relentless viciousness in enforcing innumerable unfair rules.

On another occasion, I traced my irritation at a friend's slightly insensitive remark to the repressed fury I felt about living with a partner who was constantly shaming and verbally abusive. Had I not uncovered this anger then, I might have acquiesced to her abuse indefinitely.

Here is a final example of how repressed anger automatically associates to present-time frustrations and becomes available for release. For years I believed I was stupid, irrational, and unevolved for getting angry while driving my car. I shamed myself so thoroughly whenever I felt angry in traffic that I finally fooled myself into believing that I had completely transcended highway anger.

Eventually, my ongoing anger work helped me to understand that anger was a healthy instinctive response to motorists who drove in life-threatening ways. I remained puzzled, however, for some time about the fact that driving errors of no real significance sometimes infuriated me.

Ongoing free association work finally showed me that I am only irked by other drivers' innocuous mistakes when I have reaccumulated a charge of repressed anger. When this occurs, it is as if my psyche is desperately seeking a justifiable target for anger release. In the interest of aiming my anger at the most deserving target, I now ask myself if I am being emotionally reminded of some past inconsiderateness. Am I really incensed about that BMW's relatively harmless, unsignalled lane change, or have my unconscious feelings about some more grievous unfairness in my past or current life just been piqued?

If the situation is safe enough, I harvest this opportunity and immediately vent and release whatever associated anger I uncover. If there is too much traffic to safely vent in the moment, I wait until I am in an appropriate place to "cathart." (Visibly angering at other motorists is not recommended, no matter how offensive their driving. Not only is it mutually abusive and unsafe, but it is also particularly dangerous nowadays when it is so easy to provoke violent retaliation.)

When anger is rationalized away, we squander opportunities to uncover and rid ourselves of old unworked-through hurt. Many clients come into my office in the depths of self-hatred because they believe their angry feelings or fantasies are shameful and unjustified. Those who are willing to ventilate with free association invariably find a valid explanation for their sudden flare-ups of anger, and are released from feeling painfully bottled up and unnecessarily self-alienated.

I encourage you to experiment with this technique, especially when the charge of your irritation seems disproportionate to its triggering event. I further recommend this kind of venting because it decreases the tendency to damage friendships by unconsciously transferring unresolved childhood anger and blame onto them. Since I have grieved out the lion's share of my old rage, I rarely feel irritated with my friends for reasons that do not relate to them.

I have seen so much anger healthily uncovered and released with this technique that I am convinced we are never unreasonably angry, although our apparent reasons for feeling vexed are often quite different than our real reasons. I have never worked with anyone whose anger, with

sufficient exploration, didn't make perfect sense. Thus, I believe that it is never wrong or bad to feel angry, although there are, of course, wrong and destructive ways of expressing (or repressing) anger.

GRIEVING IS NOT ALWAYS A FAST FIX

*When after heavy rain,
the storm clouds disperse,
is it not that they've
wept themselves clear to the end?*

– Ghalib

*The more a diamond is cut,
the more it sparkles.*

– Author unknown

It is hard at first to welcome the processes of grieving. It feels patently unfair that we “have to” go back and feel that pain all over again. But, in fact, we never did fully feel the bruising of our childhood abuse and neglect.

It often seems even more unfair that we need to grieve many times to recover our childhood losses. Sometimes our grieving seems unending. Nonetheless, many survivors need to grieve extensively to achieve and maintain significant recovery. D. H. Lawrence wrote about this:

I am not a mechanism, an assembly of various sections. And it is not because the mechanism is working wrongly, that I am ill. I am ill because of wounds to the soul, to the deep emotional self and the wounds to the soul take a long, long time to heal, only time can help and patience . . .

Yet sometimes it is simply not possible to feel patient about the progress of our recovery. We live in a fast-fix society, in which doctors and psychiatrists specialize in offering us instant relief. We are made to feel defective if we do not solve our problems instantly. Even when we are dying we are expected to hide our pain until our last gasp.

There are many reasons why grieving is a long-term process. Perhaps the most essential reason is that our childhood traumas were ongoing during many stages of our development. Many of us had to repress our pain as toddlers, preschoolers, school-age children, and adolescents.

The unvented pain of the past accumulates in layers in the unconscious. In this layering, memories of abuse and neglect appear to be sandwiched in between layers of grief. Each strata of painful memories emerges gradually, although not necessarily chronologically, over time.

As any particular layer of repressed trauma surfaces in consciousness, it is accompanied by the sadness and anger we could not express at the time. When we “grieve out” these feelings in the present, a sense of relief and aliveness usually follows. In the early stages of grieving, this sense of relief is sometimes fleeting. Sooner or later it is replaced by the emergence of pain that has been buried more deeply – which once grieved opens into new and, over time, longer periods of relief. This cyclical process can last anywhere from months to years depending on the severity and duration of the original trauma.

Each subsequent layer of pain that emerges comes from a new memory, or from a deeper realization of how much we were wounded by an already-remembered trauma. This is another reason why grieving takes time. The pain created by a particular type of trauma also tends to be layered. As our wrappings of minimization peel away, we increasingly feel the full impact of each particular theme of our childhood abuse and neglect.

Here is an example of this. I felt almost nothing, and remembered less, when my dying mother confessed that she frequently beat me as a toddler:

I used to crack you so hard, you'd tumble across the floor and smash
into the wall!

It wasn't that I didn't believe my mother, but I was still numbed by my denial, and I didn't remember that her hands were once strong enough to strike a fearsome blow. Moreover, I had almost no recall of what happened to me before I was seven, and by that time arthritis had taken the physical sting out of her frequent face-slapping punishments.

It was a full year before I had an emotional response to my mother's confession. It occurred when I read a journal recording of her last words and suddenly felt deeply disturbed by the awful image of her smashing me. My upset intensified when I realized that I had almost completely repressed her confession. I hadn't thought about it once since her death, and I believe I would have become amnesiac about it again had it not been for my journal. How strong our instinct is to banish and deny our perceptions of events that seem too horrible to contemplate!

As I held the image of her hitting me and began to feel how much she hurt me, my psyche suddenly associated to a memory from my army days. I remembered that I shaved my head in basic training and some of my fellow soldiers joked that it looked like I had already been to Viet Nam, as there were so many scars on my scalp. Of over ten sizable scars I could only remember getting two of them. I was puzzled by this at the time, but quickly put it out of mind, until this day when I associated the scars to her confession and vividly realized they were from her beatings. No wonder she looked so horrified and cried so traumatically when she confessed. At that moment, I finally realized I had been violently abused, and with that erosion of my denial, there came a great flood of painful but liberating grief.

I gradually uncovered and digested the full impact of those traumatic beatings over many years. And even now, I occasionally experience emotional flashbacks to her attacks in the form of “startle responses” to sudden unexpected movements. These reflexive flinching movements cogently remind me how terrified I was as a battered toddler.

Happily, my practice of grieving has finally taught me to have compassion rather than shame for myself when I experience these vestiges of my mother's beatings. I make this point to

remind survivors of extensive trauma that even with a thorough grieving of childhood hurt, their old childhood wounds may occasionally reopen and require compassionate attention. As recovery progresses, however, these emotional flashbacks occur less often and are more easily resolved.

THE DARK NIGHT OF THE SOUL

The most repressed and denied aspects of our soul . . . (are) often the treasure that lies buried in the darkness.

– Carl Jung

I can't assuage your pain with any words . . . it must burn its purifying way to completion . . . For something in you dies when you bear the unbearable. And it is only in that dark night of the soul that you are prepared to see as God sees and to love as God loves.

– Stephen Levine, *Who Dies?*

Only Grief still learns; she spends the whole night counting up our evil inheritance with her small hands. She is awkward, but all at once she makes our voice rise, sideways, like a constellation into the sky . .

– Rainer Maria Rilke

Many people experience the emotions of grief as a series of waves interspersed with troughs of calm. These waves can come as unpredictably as they do in the ocean. For survivors of long-term abuse, there may be a great many waves. Sometimes there are long periods of tranquility between them, and sometimes it feels as if there is nothing but wave after wave. And sometimes the waves are small and relatively easy to ride, and sometimes they are big “dumpers” that keep us submerged in grief much longer than we would like.

Perhaps the most difficult experience of recovery is what some survivors experience as a tidal wave of grief – a prolonged plunge into emotional pain in which grieving can only procure brief respites from hurt. Some therapists call the first long immersion in the grief-ful reexperiencing of childhood pain *the dark night of the soul*; others call it *the abandonment depression*.

The dark night of the soul is like an extended emotional flashback. Recovering survivors who have experienced prolonged abuse or extreme emotional disconnection from their parents often have at least one long encounter with their unresolved childhood abandonment depression. I have had a few such experiences that seemed to keep me under a tsunami of grief for months. At such times, I felt like I was permanently stuck reexperiencing the brutal loneliness of the years when I had absolutely no one to turn to for protection or comfort.

The most difficult task in navigating the dark night of the soul, and in becoming effective

grievers in general, is fully surrendering to our grief. I call this surrender *bottoming out*. Bottoming out occurs when we finally stop struggling against our painful feelings and let them wash over us.

Most of us have to weather many titanic struggles before we learn to gracefully bottom out. In the beginning we typically resist our emerging grief with the frenzy of drowning swimmers, often going down more than three times before settling into the depths of our pain.

It took me a number of attempts to work through my abandonment depression because I never fully surrendered to it. I apparently needed to completely exhaust myself before I could sink into its depths and fully feel it. When I finally did, I found the truth in Galway Kinnell's words:

*Crying only a little bit is no use.
You must cry until your pillow is soaked;
Then you can get up and laugh . . .*

I have since had a number of experiences in which I yearned to, but could not, bottom out into the pain I felt about new losses in my life. At these times I felt desperate for the relief I knew would follow a submersion in grief, but I could not easily turn off my reflexive struggling to stay afloat.

Most survivors need considerable grieving practice to stop automatically resisting their pain. Even with a number of experiences of fully bottoming out, we may revert back to feeling-phobic behaviors. The relief procured from any episode of bottoming out is usually so wonderful that we are tempted to believe we are, once and for all, finished with our emotional pain.

This belief is one of the last vestiges of denial. When we have grieved enduringly, we cannot help but yearn for an Elysian grief-free future. Yet everyone, dysfunctional childhood or not, faces a modicum of painful loss and calamity in their lives. In the words of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

*Into each life some rain must fall;
Some days must be dark and dreary.*

The learned habit of automatic self-abandonment in the face of new hurt is not easily deconstructed. Pain-avoidance has become second nature to us. Nonetheless we must renounce this false nature or our pain will reaccumulate and eventually burst forth as a new tidal wave of grief.

Fighting emotional pain may be the ultimate old habit that dies hard. Yet with an extended practice of grieving, we learn to bottom out more gracefully. As the dark night of the soul come to an end, our waves of grief come less frequently and feel less overwhelming. Each time we surrender to our feelings and feel the sweet relief that comes when our tears suddenly pour forth easily and copiously, we become less resistant. Without resistance, the grief that accompanies life's smaller losses and briefer emotional flashbacks is inordinately less painful.

For seasoned grievers, bottoming out eventually feels like coming home – coming home

to a place of incomparable healing within the self. When we learn how to bottom out, we share in the reality of Helen Keller's discovery:

Everything has its wonders, even darkness and silence, and I learn
whatever state I may be in, therein to be content.

Bottoming out in my abandonment depression once seemed like the hardest and longest journey of my life; yet the actual time and energy involved was scant compared to other long-term ordeals like surviving the army and earning a master's degree. As I look at it now, what could possibly merit more perseverance than breaking the habit of fleeing and living outside the center of one's being?

Depthful grieving allows us to break the habit of self-abandonment and to become so loyal to ourselves that we automatically feel empathic toward ourselves in times of difficulty.

The dark night of the soul typically ends with the dawning of a new enthusiasm for life. As the waves of old grief cease, we discover that we have become more vital than we ever thought possible. We are often shocked to realize that we were stuck in a low-grade depression all our lives.

How elating to discard our habitual childhood despondency! How wonderful to rediscover the enthusiasm of the child! Free to adventure into more joyful and playful undertakings, cobwebs seem to peel away from our eyes and ears, and like unwounded children we are blessed by everyday miracles of sight and sound:

*To see a World in a Grain of Sand
And a Heaven in a Wild Flower,
Hold Infinity in the palm of your hand
And Eternity in an hour.*

– William Blake

UNPREDICTABLE STORMS OF GRIEF

*Help us to be the always hopeful gardeners of the Spirit who know
that without darkness nothing comes to birth as without light nothing
flowers.*

– May Sarton

*Like the oceans and rivers, sometimes our well of tears is flowing. We
do not understand all the forces affecting the ocean, or our well of
tears.*

– Hazelden Meditations

Many survivors are oblivious to their childhood pain until they reach the age of thirty. Something seems to mature in us around that age which naturally challenges our denial and exposes us to the painful reality of the past.

For many survivors this challenge arrives in the form of a hypersensitivity to present-time unfairnesses. Things that didn't bother us before in our jobs or relationships suddenly make us feel acutely uncomfortable. If we begin recovery work at this time, we soon begin to notice that current injustices resemble the mistreatment and neglect of our parents. This in turn begins to uncover our childhood grief.

Many other factors precipitate unexpected storms of grief. Any new loss or death may stimulate us to become aware of the unfinished business of the past. The end of a relationship, the loss of good health, or the death of a pet may stir up a tempest in our dormant inner sea of unresolved past pain. I have even seen clients initiated into their grief by the cancellation of a favorite television series.

Moreover, our grief may suddenly be restimulated at any time if our grieving of the past was prematurely terminated by external events. A job search, a new romance, or the birth of a child are common examples of life transitions that may interrupt grieving before it has led to significant recovery.

Ironically, success in love can also stir up old grief. When we feel genuinely loved for the first time in our lives, all our past suffering from lack of love sometimes resurfaces. All the tears we didn't cry for our past loneliness becomes available for release. If we don't "grieve out" this reemerging pain, we may mistakingly interpret it as a sign that something is wrong with our newfound love. Such uncried tears often transmute into relationship-disrupting anxiety.

In a similar way, grief often spontaneously surfaces when we attain any of our heart's desires. The real recovery of any childhood loss reminds us of how impoverished our lives were without it. All the accumulated grief of long years of deprivation naturally appears at such times so that it can finally be released.

Here is a personal example of this. For decades I could not accept a compliment or positive feedback of any kind, even though I constantly daydreamed of praise and recognition. Whenever someone would say something nice about me, I'd invariably brush it off or contradict it: "Oh, I was just lucky." "You should have seen me yesterday; I really screwed it up then." "Even I get it right once in a while." "Well, I guess it makes up a little for how I messed up yesterday when I . . ."

The following incident helped me understand this behavior. A friend told me that he found my efforts on our joint project "really inspiring." Somehow I didn't react to his acknowledgment with my habitual self-discounting. I "let in" his appreciation – and, to my amazement, I welled up with tears. As I focused on my sadness, I cried over the countless heartbreaks I had suffered from never ever getting my father's approval.

Fending off recognition had been an unconscious defense against showing my grief about lack of appreciation. Later on, I discovered that my fear of crying in company was also the essential cause of my phobia about saying good-bye to loved ones. For years I went to extraordinary lengths to avoid farewells because I was unconsciously afraid that the natural poignancy of those moments would trigger my tears.

Now that extensive grieving has made me unashamed of my tears, I can easily accept the nurturance of being recognized for my good qualities. I can also enjoy a teary good-bye with an intimate, and acknowledge the depth of our feeling for each other with those tears. Unless we

feel, express, and release the pain that is specific to each of our losses, we will not be able to enjoy rewards we have earned but not yet realized.

Those who finally come to terms with their grief no longer struggle with the desire to be finished with it forever. They have learned to cherish their ability to grieve, and value it as an irreplaceable tool of emotional hygiene. They welcome periodic squalls of grief as opportunities:

. . . to be cleansed in the psyche's archetypal river of sorrow.

– Michael Meade

WHEN GRIEVING DOES NOT BRING RELIEF

Even the sun has to sometimes hide from the light.

– Author unknown

When you learn to love hell, you will be in heaven.

– Thaddeus Golas, *The Lazy Man's Guide to Enlightenment*

When our illusions of a happy childhood begin to crumble for the first time, we may feel so frightened by the amount of pain hidden beneath them that we squelch our grieving before it can effect any relief. I have frequently heard friends and clients balk after their first encounter with their grief because they fear they have a limitless amount of sadness and anger inside them: “If I really let myself cry, I’ll never stop. There’s an ocean of tears inside me.” “If I really open to my rage, I won’t stop until I have destroyed everything and everyone in sight.”

Many of us initially feel as if there is an ocean of tears and a nuclear warhead of rage inside us when we first connect with our grief. As we begin to mourn, we sometimes feel like the biblical child with a tiny bucket trying to empty an ocean into a hole in the sand. Despite this fear, I have never seen anyone who pursued recovery of their own volition drown in grief or run amok in rage.

Once grieving is freed from shame, the fear that our pain is limitless gradually dissolves. Grieving releases the accumulated pain itself in increments, and the feeling of being hopelessly overwhelmed subsides and comes less often. Most people do not have to wait long before the practice of grieving brings them a uniquely salving sense of relief.

For many, opening up to grief finally comes as a courageous act of faith. Often the faith springs from a respected person’s testimony to the value of grieving, and from seeing how this person has grown from having grieved.

Sometimes the recoveree needs the help of a therapist to shepherd him through the fear and shame that thwarts the active expression of anger and tears. Moreover, survivors of especially traumatic abuse may need considerable time in the trust-building phase of therapy before they are able to do any active grieving at all.

There are a number of other conditions in which grieving does bring relief. Grieving is of scant benefit when we hate or shame ourselves while we are crying or angering. The same is

usually true if we grieve in the presence of others who criticize or abandon us for being emotional. The more self-compassion we feel while we grieve, the more we are healed.

Grieving also brings scant relief to the adult child who still lives with or has frequent contact with abusive parents. When parental hurtfulness goes unchallenged, grieving cannot remedy the fact that the survivor is still tolerating the traumatizing conditions of childhood.

Grieving is similarly unhelpful when we live with extremely punishing mates. No amount of grieving can help a person feel better for very long in an abusive relationship.

Grieving is also ineffective when an essential part of the emoting process is being avoided. No amount of crying can release the emotional tension of unexpressed anger, and no amount of rage can bring the relief of tears.

Those who only cry when they also need to shout and those who only pound pillows when they also need to weep rarely feel released. The poet Alden Nowland said of the latter: "You crush your tears in your fists." It is normal and instinctual to feel both sad and angry about being hurt, and both forms of emoting are necessary to completely release our childhood pain.

Polarized emoting is a common problem in modern cultures in which unspoken rules relegate tears to women and anger to men. If you reminisce about your childhood, you may remember certain gender-specific activities and attitudes that contributed to the loss of your ability to either cry or express anger.

Male readers may remember times when they were teased unmercifully for showing their tears, while female readers may recall how crying with a companion created a mutual trust and love that made them best friends.

Conversely, male readers may remember the wildly thrilling games of childhood that involved harmless expressions of aggression and anger, while female readers may recall painful exclusions from "roughhousing" and other playful competitive activities.

For grief to bring relief there must be a balanced oscillation between crying and angering. Many women in recovery do not start feeling better until they begin doing anger work. Similarly, many men are relatively untouched by the recovery process until they rediscover their tears.

And many survivors, like myself, were so traumatized around their entire emotional expression that they have to strive to recover both crying and angering.

Some unfortunate survivors grieve effectively and yet do not obtain relief. Pharmacological help is sometimes appropriate for survivors who grieve for long periods of time without any relief. This is especially true if they are also suffering extended sleep deprivation. When sleeplessness endures for more than a few days, conditions are ripe for a "nervous breakdown."

Severely sleep-deprived survivors are advised to consult a recovery-oriented psychiatrist. Psychiatrists who are not grief-phobic (and all too many are!), will usually prescribe a mild tranquilizer and recommend that it be used only when absolutely necessary. Most remind their patients that they can usually safely weather a night of sleeplessness and many nights of little sleep. Weathering some sleep difficulty is crucial because of the large risk involved in taking tranquilizers. Daily usage is addicting and blunts our ability to feel so thoroughly that effective grieving is no longer possible.

If this type of medication does not restore the ameliorative effect of grieving, there is growing evidence that short courses of medications like Prozac and Zoloft help in enduring cases of "emotional overwhelm." These new antidepressants, unlike their predecessors, can be used in conjunction with psychotherapy without completely deadening the emotional nature and

jettisoning the grieving process. Unfortunately, they can also be used to effect a complete withdrawal from feeling. They are somewhat similar in this way to television which can be used as a powerful tool of consciousness expansion or as a mind-numbing escape from active participation in life.

Antidepressants are sometimes the only recourse for survivors who are too overwrought to maintain a minimum level of functioning. Those whose fear, depression or grief leaves them enduringly “housebound,” and those whose uncontrollable emotional outbursts are threatening their job or relationship security may find antidepressants appropriate and helpful.

I have observed a number of clients on these new antidepressants doing effective emotional recovery work. It appears the medication works for them by moderating their emotional experience in a way that allows feelings to surface and be grieved out in more manageable amounts. Once these clients work through a sufficient amount of their past grief, they are able to give up medication and are rewarded with lasting emotional recovery.

I have also witnessed other clients and acquaintances using antidepressants to prematurely end the work of recovery. These individuals risk permanent reliance on these drugs, (whose long-term side effects are not yet discernible), because their unresolved emotional pain typically resurfaces when they terminate medication. Sometimes this pain is more intense than before as additional “unfelt” feelings accumulated during the period of medication. Those who are still unwilling to do the work of grieving usually hastily renew their prescriptions.

While antidepressants clearly have therapeutic benefit when appropriately prescribed, there is an alarming trend to use them frivolously. Many doctors, with little or no psychiatric expertise, routinely prescribe Prozac to anyone who complains about emotional pain. Some patients are even pathologized for the functional grief that arises when they suffer major losses or disruptive life-transitions, and are then cajoled to use medication to immediately return to “normal.”

Because of this crude misuse of Prozac, many pundits view the new antidepressants as dangerous “designer drugs” that dull the affect of their users in very detrimental ways. People who cannot feel their discomfort become complacent to a narrowing and deadening of their lives. Society may not need to build uncomplaining androids for its menial and meaningless jobs. It may simply narcotize its citizenry into a soul-destroying compliance by offering easy access to pharmaceutical “cures” for emotional pain.

Antidepressants are not cures for emotional stress. Their healthy function is as a palliative that offers the floundering recoveree a reduction in the felt level of his distress so that he has time to create the real cure – the mastery of grieving and the building of a healthy relationship with his emotional nature.

6

GRIEVING PROMOTES VITALITY BY DECREASING SELF-DESTRUCTIVENESS

Neurosis is always a substitute for legitimate pain.

– Carl Jung

One cannot flee from oneself . . . No flight avails against danger from within; hence the ego's defense mechanisms are condemned to falsify the inner perception . . . Not infrequently it turns out that the ego has paid too high a price for the services which these mechanisms render.

– Sigmund Freud

There are four key ways that children protect themselves from being overwhelmed by the emotional pain of prolonged abuse and neglect. They are the defensive strategies and postures of *dissociation, hypervigilance, obsessiveness, and compulsiveness*.

Children in dysfunctional families instinctively become hypervigilant, dissociated, obsessive and/or compulsive to block out the unbearable harshness of family existence, to numb their felt sense of fear and shame, and to dull their aching hunger for love and appreciation. Children cannot experience the raw, ongoing pain of parental rejection and still maintain the desire to live. In the dysfunctional family, existing in a constantly defended state is the lesser of two evils.

If we are forced to rely on defense mechanisms throughout our childhoods, they rigidify as permanent states of being and strategies of living. These defenses and their destructive side effects injure us throughout our lives when we do not relinquish them. Living in an over-defended state is a painful relic of the past that causes us a great loss of vitality and an enormous accumulation of new, unnecessary pain.

While our defenses were like lifelines in childhood, we now have the opportunity as adults to stop harming ourselves by over-relying on them. Our habituation to our defenses causes us to accept them as normal ways of being, and leaves us oblivious to their harmful effects. This

chapter identifies the characteristics of excessive dissociation, hypervigilance, obsessiveness, and compulsiveness to help us recognize and relinquish unnecessary defended-ness.

The goal of recovery, however, is not the complete elimination of our defenses. There will always be occasions when our defensive postures healthily serve us, as we will subsequently see. Recovery aims rather at giving us the choice to be undefended in safe situations so that we are not insulated from the emotional love that can now be had in real intimacy.

Progress in recovery, then, is generally reflected in spending less time dissociated, hypervigilant, obsessive, or compulsive, and more time relaxed and spontaneously engaged with life.

DISSOCIATION

*When a person continually faces danger he is powerless to overcome,
his final line of defense is at last to avoid even feeling the danger.*

– Rollo May

Dissociation is the psychic defense mechanism by which we instinctively blunt our awareness to harsh or undesirable realities. Dissociation defends us from being over-impacted by internal or external circumstances that are too painful or unpleasant to apprehend.

When we are dissociated, we unconsciously remove part or all of our awareness from our immediate reality. Dissociation, like the other defenses, is not an all-or-none phenomenon. Most of us vary in our degree and frequency of being dissociated.

Mild dissociation manifests as an innocuous absentmindedness. Most of us periodically dissociate while listening and suddenly realize we haven't registered what was just said. My first psychology teacher described this as our tendency to wander off on "thirty-second mental trips."

Daydreaming is another name for these dissociating mental trips, and daydreaming is actually a healthy psychic mechanism when it is not excessive or does not interfere with normal life functioning. In moderation, daydreaming is a delightful form of entertainment, an important part of creativity, and a direct channel into the deepest levels of intuition. As W.H. Auden wrote:

Human beings are by nature actors, who cannot become something
until first they have pretended to be it.

Sleep is also a healthy form of dissociation, unless it is excessive. Those who cannot stay awake when they are physically well-rested, sometimes become groggy as they dissociate to avoid something they don't want to face. Some of us become instantly drowsy whenever our feelings are stirred up and threaten to emerge into consciousness.

Dissociation is also commonly experienced as dullness, foggiess, or being in a daze. A motorist who drives past his usual freeway exit is often dissociating. So is the reader who suddenly realizes she has no idea what was in the last paragraph she read. Many accidents are caused by this level of dissociation. They occur when we are not present enough to notice the

branch we are about to walk into, or the car that has suddenly stopped in front of us.

A deeper form of dissociation occurs when we appear “spaced out,” as if we are “off in another world,” or “as if the lights are on, and nobody’s home.” Dissociation is especially problematic when it includes unpleasant sensations of confusion, unreality, and disorientation. When the onset of such intense dissociative symptoms is sudden and abrupt, we may feel faint and dizzy, as if we are spinning out of control and losing our normal sense of reality.

The most intense forms of dissociation are shock, coma, and amnesia. When a trauma is too overwhelming to endure, awareness is automatically and completely withdrawn from consciousness. The prodigious amount of physical pain caused by a serious car accident often sends the victim into shock. If his injuries are massive, he may become comatose.

Amnesia is also a dissociative response to trauma. Most children become at least partially amnesiac when they suffer severe, ongoing abuse. In overly traumatic times they dissociate so far away from their immediate reality that they don’t perceive what is directly before them. Perhaps you have seen pictures of broken, hollow-eyed children who seem to no longer be behind their eyes. Maybe the mechanism in our brain that registers and records what we see doesn’t operate during our greatest traumas.

I can vividly remember how my poor scapegoat-sister would get a vacant, faraway look in her eyes whenever my rage-aholic father “helped” her with her homework. Traumatized by his punishing methods, her attention dissolved so thoroughly she couldn’t possibly attend to his instruction. At ten, this girl, who later recovered enough to pursue her doctorate, could not correctly answer “How much is 5 + 6?” or any other question hurled at her by my father.

My sister’s inability to answer my fuming father’s simple questions was in no way a matter of intelligence. It was purely a dissociative response to the terror that made it impossible for her to register or make sense of his questions. The fact that she still does not remember his bruising interrogations is further testimony to just how dissociated she was.

I believe this kind of dissociation is the most relevant issue for many schoolchildren diagnosed with learning disabilities, as well as many adults labeled with the latest “catch-all” diagnosis: adult attention deficit disorder. I think research would show that many of these individuals suffer from abominable parenting, and are so overwhelmed by pain and fear that they cannot stay present in normal consciousness long enough to learn efficiently. Moreover, I know many survivors whose recovery work has allowed them to reclaim their native intelligence, transcend their miserable school histories, and finally achieve scholastic and professional success.

Dissociation protects us in childhood from absorbing the full toxicity of destructive parental messages. Letting our parents’ diatribes “go in one ear and out the other” is a healthy response to an unhealthy situation.

Dissociation also allows children to stay physically present around trauma without fully experiencing it. Some children anesthetize themselves so thoroughly with dissociation that they feel little or no pain during beatings. This is another reason why we customarily minimize our parents’ violence.

Many of us glibly dismiss the fact that we were repeatedly whipped on our bare buttocks with a belt, a switch or a huge taut adult hand. I bet we would howl in agony and tremble in fear now, when we are not so dissociated, if we were flogged in the same way by someone of proportionate size and strength.

Here is a final observation on the mechanics of dissociation. I believe dissociation takes

place when attention shifts from the literal, reality-oriented left brain and dissolves in the more imaginative, transcendence-oriented right brain. The right brain is reputed to control cognitive processes that involve less self-conscious attention. These range from active imagination to spontaneous daydreaming to the deep un-self-conscious states of meditation to the temporary extinction of self-awareness in sleep. Dissociation then seems to be our reflex to retreat into a deeply oblivious part of the right brain whenever we are helpless in the face of a harsh reality.

EVERYTHING IN MODERATION INCLUDING DEFENDED-NESS

If we were seriously hurt by our parents, we may be adult children who still overrely on dissociation. While effective grieving often automatically decreases unnecessary dissociation, ridding ourselves of this defense is not an all-or-none issue. As noted above, a modicum of dissociation is normal and healthy, particularly as it occurs in sleep, daydreaming, and some meditative states.

Dissociation is also a natural, invaluable response to sudden intense hurt. In the face of severe trauma, we are fortunate if we can retreat into some degree of shock. I wish I could learn to dissociate in the dentist's chair! During particularly brutal dental procedures in the past, I relied on nitrous oxide to help me dissociate. Unfortunately, many people become dependent on drugs in their efforts to avoid pain. Alcohol, marijuana, tranquilizers, and opiates are widely used to dissociate from pain.

Dissociative shock is also a natural, helpful response to the death or loss of someone we deeply love. When we lose someone we cherish, our pain is so monumental we would be completely devastated if we did not dissociate. People who cannot dissociate at such moments are so flooded with pain that they become incapacitated and sometimes deteriorate into madness or suicide. This is why it is normal to only feel numb when we first hear about the death of a loved one, or when our partners, without warning, say they are leaving us.

It takes time to digest the overwhelming hurt of such devastating losses. They beget so much grief that effective mourning requires many discrete sessions of feeling and emoting our pain. Temporary dissociation is a healthy release from overlong immersions in grief in the early stages of mourning when the relief brought by grieving is sometimes hard to find.

The accumulated grief from our childhood losses is for many the greatest grief of all – far greater than that of any particular tragic loss in the present. This grief amassed daily for many years during the constant wounding and hacking away of our real selves. During my first dark night of the soul, I frequently felt like I had been born a rain forest and was clear-cut to the size of the trees on an urban block. At that time, it was sometimes a blessed relief to use television to “zone out” and dissociate for a few hours.

Without the ability to mobilize defense mechanisms like dissociation, survivors cannot embrace a long-term grieving process. Some severely traumatized individuals are unable to reinvoke defensive strategies once they uncover their reservoirs of childhood pain. Without the buoy of dissociation, these adult children cannot gradually process their grief without drowning in it.

Tragically, many chronic schizophrenics, extreme compulsives, and severe borderline personality disorders must rely on lifetime medication or permanent entrenchment in rigid

defended-ness. This is a key reason why no one should ever be coerced or shamed into doing recovery work.

Although almost everyone in recovery sometimes feels as if they are drowning in their pain, it is highly unlikely that anyone who has read this far is among the small percentage of people who cannot open to their grief. Those who cannot manage grieving usually sense it on such a deep level that they shun books that encourage childhood exploration.

Most recoverees must weather occasional experiences of feeling overwhelming grief to achieve significant recovery. Feeling overwhelmed was a major part of early childhood wounding. We need to reexperience our intense feelings of abandonment to find our own sorely needed compassion for those tragic years of our lives, for as Carl Jung said:

It is only in the state of complete abandonment and loneliness that we
experience the helpful powers of our own nature.

As recovery progresses, there is less need to retreat from grieving into dissociation or other defensive postures and strategies because mourning more consistently brings relief. Over time, habitual dissociation and defended-ness spontaneously decrease and we become more fully present to both internal and external reality. This saves us from the fate of emulating the comedian who said he was so habitually dissociated that his life flashed before his eyes during a near-death experience and he was shocked to see he wasn't in it.

HYPERVIGILANCE

*Sometimes called “hypervigilant,” adult children automatically scan
the environment for cues, wanting to know what is in front, behind, to
the left and to the right of them at all times.*

– Herbert Gravitz and Julie Bowden

Hypervigilance is the defensive strategy of becoming intensely watchful. Hypervigilance is a frozen, contracted “adrenalized” state of anxiously anticipating hostility. In nature it corresponds with the *freeze response*, the posture that animals instinctively assume when they cannot utilize their fight-or-flight response to combat or escape attack.

Animals and humans reflexively adopt the freeze response when their attackers or predators are too powerful to fight off or too swift to outrun. Many survivors were attacked so frequently in childhood that they are habitually hypervigilant, perpetually on guard, and painfully stuck in the freeze response.

Children who are subject to ongoing abuse instinctively become hypervigilant, assuming rigid postures of intense observation and anticipation. They are like cornered animals anxiously trying to blend in and not be noticed. They shrink, contract, and become as quiet and motionless as possible to avoid detection. Consequently, hypervigilance is sometimes also called the camouflage response.

When we habitually shrink and freeze in hypervigilance, we damage our health through a chronic contraction of our body's musculature. Hypervigilant tightening impedes the functions of circulation and respiration, and blocks the flow of *Chi*. (Chi is the term acupuncturists use to describe the body's circulating supply of vital energy.) The shallow breathing and constant tension of hypervigilance depletes us and leaves us susceptible to injury and disease.

Most of us experience varying degrees of hypervigilance. Only in times of the greatest threat does hypervigilance manifest as a paralytic kind of frozenness. When we are less hypervigilant, we resemble the night watchman in a store with a history of break-ins. We spend long periods of time with our attention locked behind our eyes anxiously anticipating danger. Hypervigilance tends to increase in unfamiliar situations. Many survivors are reflexively wary of all unknown people, particularly those who resemble their original abusers.

Hypervigilance is a child's only means of protection in an abusive family. By remaining perpetually on guard, they can sometimes recognize subtle indications that their parents are entering the "attack mode." This gives them time to hide, create a distraction, or shrink and make themselves a smaller target; sometimes it only provides them with enough time to get their hands up to cushion a sudden blow.

I worked with several clients who were not even allowed this defense. They were forced to hold their hands at their sides while being slapped in the face. For those clients, dissociation was a more effective defense than hypervigilance.

When I contemplate my own history of hypervigilance it seems that my parents' hair-trigger tempers banished me from my heart and forced me to take up permanent residence in my head. There, I intently watched my parents for signs of impending abuse, rigorously censored my speech and movements, and desperately tried to figure out what kind of false self they wanted me to be.

One of my clients recently discovered vivid evidence of her childhood training in hypervigilance and self-censorship. While watching a family film, she was appalled to see herself, a mere toddler, walking around the house repeatedly smacking her own hand and decrying: "Bad girl, don't touch; bad girl don't touch." When the camera panned on her parents, they laughed in delight and eagerly encouraged her to many encores.

In a similar vein, I remember my surprise years ago when I noticed myself, alone in my apartment, saying "I'm sorry" every time I dropped or bumped into something. I was outraged by this mindless habit when I finally became aware of it: my parents had made me so shamefully apologetic that I was apologizing to the walls and the floor! This realization eventually helped me see how incessantly and unnecessarily hypervigilant I was about almost everything I said and did.

LOOKING OUT TO AVOID LOOKING IN

The defensive posture of hypervigilance also serves as a distraction from emotional pain. Children numb their chronic fear, shame, and loneliness by keeping their attention constantly focused outward. Many adult children are habituated to hypervigilance because their unresolved grief threatens to emerge whenever they are not on guard.

Grieving releases the emotional tension that keeps us suspended in hypervigilance,

allowing us to relax and become more agile in our bodies. Twenty years of grief work has improved both my physical health and my athletic performance. Although I am nearly fifty years old and “should” be declining in my basketball skills, I continue to improve beyond any level I have previously reached. I “hold my own” and “run the court” for hours with men who are in their twenties.

I believe grieving created this benefit by diminishing my performance anxiety. *Performance anxiety* is the insidious hybrid of hypervigilance, perfectionism, and emotional flashbacks that throttles and inhibits our ability to respond gracefully and spontaneously. Performance anxiety is stimulated by the unconscious fear that we will be treated as harshly as we were in our families if we miscue or falter in any way. One of the most tragic losses of childhood is that many of us don’t participate in games, sports, dancing, and other forms of play because of unresolved performance anxiety.

Before I grieved substantially, performance anxiety severely impeded my natural athleticism. I was so terrified of making mistakes that I often froze whenever I needed to act. When I was at bat or trying to catch the ball, the ball often went by me before I could respond. And when I did catch the ball, I’d often try so hard to make a perfect throw that I’d throw wild or wait too long to make the play.

Fortunately my performance anxiety occasionally abated when I played with friends, and so I continued to play. Whenever my hypervigilance was restimulated, however, I made an inordinate number of miscues. Each error then drove my hypervigilance up another notch and I contracted more and more, desperately trying not to “screw up.” If the play then came in my direction, my mind vacillated painfully and inefficiently between such choices as jump or dodge, pass or shoot, swing or “take,” run or hold. I was so locked up in my head that my body’s instinctive talents were rendered inoperable.

My worst performance anxiety occurred when there were observers or participants who reminded me of my parents. At such times, my hypervigilance escalated into fright and my performance sometimes spiraled downward in a humiliating series of errors. In my worst disasters on the playing field, I became so completely hamstrung by fear that I sometimes dissociated and didn’t even register that the ball was coming in my direction. Once a basketball pass bounced off my head and went ingloriously into the basket!

On other occasions, my performance deteriorated because I was lost in prayer, obsessively begging for divine intervention: “Please God, don’t let him hit the ball to me! I promise, I’ll go to mass and communion every day for a week if I just don’t have to make one more error.”

My sports hypervigilance hampered me for decades with an exaggerated fear of “dropping the ball.” Because of this, I developed little of my full potential in sports. I never risked new “moves,” for I couldn’t bear to make the initial errors that are requisite to acquiring new skills or “perfecting” old ones.

My performance anxiety remained intact until I began using my anger to resolve it. I did this by quietly getting angry inside every time I felt afraid on the court. I barked back at the voices of doom that accompanied my hypervigilance. I blasted my parents for inculcating me with fear. I told my inner child that I wouldn’t let them or anyone else abuse us for making a mistake.

I used this technique hundreds of times before it allowed me to feel safe enough to begin relaxing in sports. Many years of practice have rewarded me now with the ability to treat mistakes as learning opportunities rather than as catastrophes that deserve humiliation.

My hypervigilance continuously atrophies as I grow older, and I increasingly connect with the relaxed, instinctive know-how of my body. Almost every time I play basketball now, I marvel at how much my reflexes take over and guide my performance. I can hardly believe how many missed shots I willingly weathered to become relatively proficient at shooting ambidextrously within five feet of the basket.

HEALTHY HYPERVIGILANCE

Hypervigilance is self-destructive to the degree that it is chronic. There are many situations in life, especially in modern industrial societies, in which hypervigilance is necessary and helpful. Safe driving, for example, requires considerable hypervigilance. Those who are not hypervigilant in traffic have many more accidents than those who drive defensively. They are more susceptible to being hit by dissociated drivers!

Mild hypervigilance is also useful in our social lives. Many of us are prone to attract people as abusive as our parents via a phenomenon known as repetition compulsion (see [Chapter 7](#)). Because of this, we need to be more discriminating in choosing friends. Cautiousness with new acquaintances gives us the necessary time to assess whether they are consistently fair and respectful.

Some survivors shame themselves because they always feel hypervigilant around new people. Those of us who suffered long-term abuse need to accept that we may never feel relaxed around others until we get to know them well.

THE HYPERVIGILANCE-DISSOCIATION “TWO-STEP”

An adult child can be habituated to both hypervigilance and dissociation. These defenses coexist in the survivor whose body is hypervigilantly tense and contracted, but whose awareness is dissociated and not preoccupied with careful watching.

More common is the survivor who switches rapidly from one defense to the other in an all-or-none manner. Hypervigilant to the point of exhaustion, he suddenly and silently drifts off far away into his own dissociative world. There, he remains foggily lost and out of contact until a new threatening stimulus catapults him back into hypervigilance.

Many survivors are strangers to the less extreme zones of alertness and relaxation that lie between the poles of hypervigilance and dissociation. Effective grieving opens up the vast territory of consciousness that exists between these extremes.

OBSESSIVENESS

*If my heart could do my thinking
And my head begin to feel
I'd look upon the world with love
And know what is truly real.*

– Van Morrison, *I Forgot That Love Existed*

Many adult children use *obsessiveness* – excessive mental preoccupation – to defend against painful feelings. Many of us become habituated to obsessive thinking in childhood in order to distract ourselves from feeling the hostility and lack of love in our families.

The most common form of obsessiveness, one that often passes as functional, is nonstop thinking. Obsessives are over-bound to left-brain processes and inordinately consumed by their thinking.

Many intellectuals are little more than sophisticated obsessives. Constant cogitation renders them so feeling-less that they match their boring and wearisome stereotype. Completely removed from their hearts and souls, they are without passion and less personally engaging than computers.

How awful that our culture automatically deems intellectual accomplishment evidence of an evolved state of consciousness! In this excerpt from his autobiography, Charles Darwin laments about the fallacy of this evaluation:

My mind seems to have become a kind of machine for grinding general laws out of large collections of fact, but why this should have caused the atrophy of that part of the brain alone, on which higher tastes depend, I cannot conceive . . . The loss of these tastes is a loss of happiness, and may possibly be injurious to the intellect, and more probably to the moral character, by enfeebling the emotional part of our nature.

I do not mean to imply here that intellectualism is always a defense or limitation. Intellectuals with intact emotional natures like John Bradshaw and Joseph Campbell are a joy to behold. Similarly, geniuses like Einstein and Newton obsessed on matters of profound significance and made great contributions to humanity without sacrificing their diverse appreciation of life.

Unfortunately these few seem to be the exception and not the rule. All too many academics and scientists hurt themselves and diminish their lives (and their families' lives) by over-focusing on mental processes. Strangers to heartfelt self-expression, they typically suffer great loneliness because they cannot connect emotionally with others.

The most extreme form of obsessiveness is ritualized repetition of the same thought. As a young Catholic boy I relied heavily on the distraction that came from the chronic obsession: “Mary, Jesus, and Joseph, pray for me.” When I was particularly anxious (when my forbidden rage or tears were stirring just below consciousness), I silently chanted this over and over for hours. I believe many (certainly not all) forms of prayer are little more than obsessive defenses against feeling. The anxious constant repetition of scripture or mantra is often unwittingly used to drive off the “demons” of emotion.

The most prevalent, self-destructive form of obsession is worry. At its most intense this manifests as the catastrophizing and drasticizing described in the last chapter.

Many obsessives have menus of issues that they worry about, recycling them over and

over in various combinations. A mind busy wondering where Johnny is or when the earthquake is coming is distracted from deeper pain. The author of “an idle mind is the devil’s workshop” must have been some poor obsessive who was shamed into thinking that his underlying feelings were manifestations of hell. Ironically, it is the perpetual rejection of feelings that creates the seemingly hellish internal conditions that many of us desperately defend against.

Obsessive worrying is a self-perpetuating process. In one of my worst phases of obsessing, I worried that I was not worrying enough whenever my perseverating briefly abated. Going to the opposite extreme in early recovery, I frequently worried that I worried too much. I was like Calvin the cartoon character who when caught in an exit-less maze of worry exclaimed: “My brain is trying to kill me.”

Obsessive worry is only exit-less, however, if we are searching for a “thinking” way out of it. Healthy alleviation from worry comes primarily from descending into the feeling realms and grieving out the emotional pain that fuels obsession.

When we worry inordinately, it is as if our unfelt, watery feelings of hurt are vaporizing and rising into the airy mental realms where they smudge our thoughts with painful perspectives. Worry goes on and on and on, because vaporization is such a slow and ineffective way of processing liquid-like emotions. Painful emotions need the water of tears to be resolved. Tears instantly halt obsession by releasing the mercurial fear that runs rampant throughout the drasticizing mind.

The habit of obsessive worrying must be broken because we live in a world so troublesome we will never run out of things to worry about. Unrelenting worry will not only distract us from our feelings but also from sleep, relaxation, play, relating, and the maintenance of our everyday affairs.

If we do not grieve and begin to break the habit of obsessing we risk becoming like the old man described by Winston Churchill who reached the end of his life and in a terrible epiphany exclaimed: “All the terrible things in my life never actually happened!”

HEALTHY OBSESSIVENESS

Obsessiveness, like the other key defenses, is healthy in moderation. Prolonged periods of concentrated thinking are obviously invaluable for certain tasks. We couldn’t learn to read or write without obsessing on language. Our lives would be greatly impoverished if we did not spend a good deal of time reasoning, analyzing, introspecting, and philosophizing. Thinking can be a joy when it is not merely a distraction from feeling.

Many real-life issues require perseverating mental focus for healthy solutions. *Creative worry* is a term I’ve coined to describe the prolonged analysis of a complex issue or choice. If I find myself reeling from my third successive betrayal in a relationship, it will behoove me to spend a great deal of time thinking about the nuances of my relationship history. Similarly, if I am offered a job in another part of the country, I will probably need to enduringly ponder a host of pros and cons relating to the potential move.

In early recovery, we may also need to obsess about how to communicate our feelings. There is usually a great deal of consideration involved in learning to express upset feelings healthily. Prolonged contemplation often helps us discern whether our hurt comes from the past

or the present, and whether our feelings should be released on our own or expressed directly to whomever they concern.

Wisdom in the most important decisions of life sometimes only comes from weeks or months of thoroughly examining all our options. And of course, in matters of great import, healthy conclusions and decisions usually ensue from weighing all our thoughts and feelings about a given issue.

THE THERAPEUTIC CUL-DE-SAC OF OVER-ANALYZING OBSESSIONS

The content of obsessions is often given too much attention and importance by both clients and psychotherapists. It is the actual process of obsessing, not the content of our obsessions, that is frequently the most relevant issue in recovery. When we focus exclusively on the details of our obsessions, rather than on the underlying emotional pain that causes them, we often do little more than increase our overall obsessiveness.

While it would be absurd to say that content is never important, chronic obsessives must learn to shift the focus of their awareness away from their heads into their bodily-based emotional experiences. Unfortunately this proposition often sounds both preposterous and undoable (unthinkable!) to many obsessives. When I was first advised to drop my awareness into my belly – into my “gut level” feelings, I thought to myself: “What is this guy talking about? Awareness is something that is exclusively in my head and brain. What is this gut level feeling nonsense? He’s got to be kidding!”

Nonetheless, as an ex-world-class obsessive, I know that obsession-bound survivors can find out firsthand about these mysterious things called feelings. The technique for enhancing feeling described in [Chapter 5](#) has helped many of my clients connect with their feelings.

If you still seem to be “stuck in your head” after trying this technique, you may need the assistance of a therapist who specializes in emotional recovery. Therapists use a variety of emotional release techniques to help survivors “drop down” from their obsessing minds into their feelings. Reichian therapy, bioenergetics, gestalt exercises, rebirthing, and Rosen Bodywork are some of the most proven of these techniques.

In dealing with the vestiges of my own obsessiveness, I still occasionally catch myself in my childhood “obsession of choice”: rapidly and repeatedly counting to ten. (I sometimes added compulsiveness to this by walking around for hours trying to find license plates with pairs of numbers that added up to ten.) Now that I know that counting is one of my obsessive defenses against feeling, I immediately assume that I have “gone unconscious” to an emotional upset when I find myself mindlessly counting.

If I focus my awareness deep inside myself at such times and ask myself the question “What hurts?” I invariably discover that I have once again “stuffed” my feelings. When I then drop down and fully feel or emote my repressed feelings, my obsessing typically ceases.

This same approach commonly brings me relief when I catch myself obsessing excessively about world tragedies or impending calamities over which I have no control. When I grieve compassionately for the plight of the downtrodden and the world itself, unproductive worry ceases and I usually return to an appreciation of life.

Grieving also helps me gain a realistic perspective on how much I can healthily do to help

others without taking on grandiose responsibility for everyone who needs healing in the world.

The first time grieving brought me significant relief from my chronic obsessing, I was struck by a startling internal image. I saw myself being released from long-term captivity in a room with a phonograph record, stuck in a groove, bleating out the same refrain over and over. What tremendous relief in my escape, as the refrain that had been incessantly hammering me was from the most maudlin Country and Western song imaginable.

COMPULSIVENESS

Wilhelm Reich described compulsive characters as “living machines.”

– Rollo May

The only way to get our brains out of hock and cure our compulsivity is to go back and re-experience the emotions . . . Our lost childhoods must be grieved. Our compulsivities are the results of those old blocked feelings (our unresolved grief) being acted out over and over again. We either work out these feelings by re-experiencing them, or we act them out in our compulsivities.

– John Bradshaw

Compulsiveness is the defensive strategy of using a repetitive behavior or narrow set of behaviors to become distracted from feeling. Thumb-sucking, skin-picking, depilation, nail-biting, overeating, and fidgeting are common compulsions found in abused children.

In the course of surviving our childhoods, many of us become addicted to compulsiveness. As we grow older, we may continue to rely on our old compulsions or become dependent on new ones.

Compulsions typically revolve around substances or processes. Some survivors blot out their feelings with their “substance of choice” – food, alcohol, drugs; others numb out by overusing their “process of choice” – exercise, work, sex, busyness, cleaning, shopping.

The most classic compulsion is seen in the individual who washes his hands over and over throughout the day. I believe this compulsion arises when toxic shame transmutes ungrieved feelings into a sense of disgust and contamination. Self-disgust seems to be the unconscious, operant factor in most compulsive behaviors.

Certain compulsions are more socially acceptable than others. Workaholism and incessant cleaning are widely accepted compulsions that typically earn praise rather than pity for their victims. Spending and shopping compulsions are commonly made light of with slogans like “Born to shop” and “Shop until you drop.” And while illicit drugs are routinely frowned upon, prescription drugs are often condoned, and in many circles alcohol and tobacco are not even considered drugs.

Moreover overeating, which is perhaps our most widespread compulsion, is usually disparaged only when it leads to obesity. Several of my friends visiting from overseas were

astounded by the large number of obese people in America. One expatriate friend of mine once quipped: “In a nation where consumption seems to be a patriotic duty, never have so many dined so much for their country.”

Finally, workaholism is probably our most insidious compulsion because it is a hallowed value in our highest echelons of business and government. A 1994 PBS television special, *Running Out of Time*, purported that work has become a new religion for many people:

Work is no longer a means to an end, but an end in itself.

According to the producers, workaholism creates so much time pressure in Americans that “time-urgency” is now the number one cause of premature death in America.

The Japanese are so widely afflicted by time-urgency that they use the term *karishi* to describe death from workaholism. *Karishi* is estimated to kill ten thousand Japanese a year through heart failure. Time-urgency has also given birth to a new occupation in Japan in which actors are hired to impersonate the families of workers. These ersatz families then visit the parents of workers who are too time-pressed to make the visits themselves!

COMPULSIONS WEAR OUT OUR BODIES

What is without periods of rest will not endure.

– Ovid

Compulsives and obsessives diminish their lives in similar ways. Whenever their feelings are stimulated, compulsives amplify their addiction just as obsessives magnify their worrying. The nicotine addict chain-smokes. The drinker binges and drinks night and day, rationalizing that “it must be 5 o’clock somewhere.” The workaholic works late into the night, inventing new deadlines that must be met. The food addict eats nonstop, sometimes resorting to bulimic emptying to make room for more food. The “TV-holic” “channel-surfs” until the early hours, afraid to retire and face his feelings. The compulsive cleaner dusts anything that does not move, cycling over and over from room to room.

The compulsiveness of addiction is a self-perpetuating, cyclic process. As avoided feeling accumulates, we need increasing amounts of our “preferred” activity or substance to remain distracted. Amplified compulsiveness increasingly damages our bodies, creating even more pain, which in turn intensifies drivenness, *ad infinitum*.

Many compulsives eventually run themselves so ragged that they unconsciously create accidents, illness or depression to get a break from their addiction. In my hyperactive twenties I “relied” on an unending string of foot injuries to give my body time to repair and replenish itself.

As the pressure of repressed feeling intensifies, our repertoire of compulsions tends to multiply. The wear and tear they effect on our bodies often compels us to look increasingly to medication for relief. Over time we depend more and more on an expanding menu of over-the-counter, prescription, and illicit drugs – most of which have their own damaging side effects.

Compulsive substance abusers use increasingly powerful hangover remedies. Exercise addicts need greater amounts of anesthesia to continue moving. Workaholics rely on a variety of medications to perk them up while they are awake, and to put them to sleep when they finally decide to rest.

Many overeaters are also “hooked” on health-damaging regimens of medication. They are often forced to alternate constipation and diarrhea medicines, frequently “chasing” them with antacids.

Many food addicts also torture their bodies with compulsive cycles of fasting, bingeing, and purging. Others injure themselves attempting to lose weight through drastic dieting and exercising. Still others attack their weight with appetite suppressors, many of which are now widely available without prescription, even though they contain health-damaging derivatives of the illicit street-drug “speed.”

The ongoing accumulation of pain inherent in compulsivity eventually results in dramatic somatization (see [Chapter 4](#)). The compulsive exerciser is hobbled by rheumatism. The cleanaholic is perpetually tormented with allergies. The workaholic succumbs to “nervous exhaustion.” The compulsive eater lives in constant digestive distress. The smoker contracts lung cancer. The drinker murders his liver.

Compulsiveness not only hurts the individual but also his intimates. Most of us have probably seen ample evidence of the havoc drugs and alcohol wreak on families and relationships. Yet the camouflaged addictions of working, cleaning, shopping, and eating also destroy intimacy in many families and relationships. How can children feel loved by a father whose work addiction – or a mother whose compulsive fastidiousness – prevents the family from spending intimate time together? How can spouses feel close to partners who constantly overspend and threaten their marriage with bankruptcy? How can spouses remain emotionally invested in partners whose eating habits destroy their health, gradually immobilize them, and invite early death?

OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVENESS

The whites pace back and forth in their rooms. We Indians think it is because the white man's mind is working while he has nothing to do; that he himself may be idle, yet his mind keeps working.

– Goodbird, a Native American Hidatsa

Today, however, when practically all our patients are compulsive-obsessional neurotics, we find the chief block to therapy is the incapacity of the patient to feel.

– Rollo May

Compulsiveness frequently pairs with obsessiveness. Many of us alternate between these two defenses to avoid our feelings. Workaholics typically do this by spending most of their time either actively working or passively worrying about work.

Sexual addictions are another common example of obsessive-compulsiveness. When a sex addict is not actively engaging in or pursuing sex, s/he is frequently obsessing about it. Some even obsess about sex while they are having it, often diminishing the richness of sexual relating by imagining themselves engaged with someone other than the person they are with.

Many Western men are predisposed to sexual preoccupation because they depend on sex for all their intimacy needs. Our culture engenders this by making men afraid to relate intimately in ways that are not sexual. For many of us, this begins in toddler-hood when we are banished from our parents' laps as soon as we are able to walk.

Most male toddlers are initiated into affection-less, mainstream masculinity before they can even catch a ball. They are taught that being masculine means being tough, need-less, tight-lipped, and impervious to pain. As John Bradshaw once said in a lecture: "We can put a man on the moon, but we can't figure out how to say "I love you" to our sons.

By the time boys become adolescents they are strangers to interpersonal comfort – filled with the pain that comes from complete emotional abandonment. When their sexuality begins to manifest, they are typically enamored with masturbation because orgasm effects an emotional release, as the famous psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich pointed out in *The Function of the Orgasm*. When adolescents become men who do not find any other means of emotional release, they are likely to masturbate compulsively throughout their lives.

Sexual intercourse offers young males a chance to get the affection and tenderness long missing in their lives. Since most do not grow in their ability to communicate and connect verbally and emotionally however, the intimacy of intercourse is frequently minimal. The comfort derived from strictly physical sex is so short-lived, that the hunger for sex is rarely sated. Still starving for emotional connection, many males feel driven to obtain as much sex as possible. Quantity is confused with quality, and periods of abstinence are dominated by obsessive sexual fantasy.

We men seem to be even more desperate for emotional release than we are for tenderness. I believe this is reflected in the stereotype of men rushing to intercourse without much pause for foreplay. Women typically value the broader sexual pleasuring of foreplay because, among other reasons, they have other nonsexual emotional outlets. In support of this hypothesis, I hear numerous men reporting that they are becoming more sensual in their sexuality as their emotional expressiveness increases. These men report an increasing appetite for nonsexual affection both before and after intercourse.

The modern man's obsession with the female breast may also be rooted in the way males are customarily ostracized from tenderness so early in life. Breast fetishism may relate to a yearning for the days of infancy when breasts were strongly associated with an all too brief exposure to physical tenderness. I find it informative that breasts were not hidden or seen as overtly sexual in many pre-Industrial societies. Perhaps this is because men in those cultures were not prematurely weaned from motherly affection and expected to remain emotionally self-sufficient forevermore. Little wonder Western men ascribe such paramount importance to sex when social mores still prohibit them from seeking care, support or comfort in nonsexual ways.

All this is not to denigrate masturbation or intercourse. Both are wonderful parts of life when used moderately. Of the former, Woody Allen said: "Don't knock masturbation. It's making love with someone who is very special to me." And sexual intercourse is, of course, a beautiful form of communication in and of itself. Neither, however, ever replaces our need for emotional expressiveness or for intimate, nonsexual communication. Attempting to fulfill verbal

intimacy needs with sex alone is like trying to satisfy physical hunger with pictures of food – or intimacy hunger with pictures of naked bodies.

The literature of the Twelve Step program, Sex and Love Addicts Anonymous (SLAA), describes the pitfalls of substituting sex for other kinds of intimacy:

We came to use the intensity of sex . . . to substitute for other satisfactions, to comfort ourselves for a lack of love, to avoid, or try to make unnecessary, attending to a life that seems to give us too much pain . . . we sacrifice closeness with others, and our loneliness and anxiety grow . . .

In my own experience, sexual obsession and compulsion drove me relentlessly until I learned how to connect emotionally and authentically with myself and others. If I hadn't grieved and reclaimed my ability to communicate multidimensionally, I'm convinced I'd still be lost and lonely, looking for love in all the wrong places.

Some women are as obsessive-compulsive about verbal relating as their male counterparts are about sexual relating. Just as men are not encouraged to find fulfilling sustenance in relationships, many women are not encouraged to find it in work. As girls they are often excluded from the become-powerful-in-the-world games of boys, and are often restricted to more passive, conversation-oriented activities such as playing with dolls and having tea parties.

Girls are customarily expected to be nice, chatty, and verbally reassuring in the mainstream version of "femininity." Girls who are not able to break free from this stereotype often grow up believing they have little of value to offer wider society. This often compels them to over-rely on relationship activities and verbal interactions for their sense of self-worth.

When chatting becomes a woman's drug of choice and no one is available for conversation, she is then forced to get her "talk-fix" through obsessive inner dialogues about her concerns. Sex-junkies react similarly when they preoccupy themselves with sexual fantasies during the times they are partner-less (or pornography-less).

As in all addictions, compulsive relating severely limits our ability to fully partake in life. Those who are addicted to verbal or sexual relating (real or imagined) are left with little time or inclination to pursue the solitary interests that add meaning and richness to life.

No amount of verbal or sexual intimacy ever replaces the need for intimacy with the self. Those who compulsively seek contact with others are often searching externally for something that can only be found in the self. Pursuing self-sufficiency needs through constant personal interaction is like trying to paint with someone else's hand.

We need quality time with ourselves as well as with others. Positive experiences of solitude are as essential to us as best friends and lovers. Loving interaction cannot replace the need for a variety of singular, self-sustaining interests and activities. Compulsive relating is often a defense against old, buried feelings that come up in times of being alone. We need to grieve out these feelings in order to claim our inborn ability to flourish in our own company.

BUSYHOLISM

*All that is hurrying soon will be over with;
only what lasts can bring us to the truth.
Young men, don't put your trust into the trials of flight,
into the hot and quick.
All things already rest:
darkness and morning light, flower and book.*

– Rilke

He who can no longer pause to wonder is as good as dead.

– Albert Einstein

Busyness is a term I have coined to define the most common and least recognized form of compulsiveness – constant busyness. (According to The Oxford Dictionary, busyness was the original meaning of business!)

“Busyness” are constantly in action, moving from activity to activity in a never ending quest for “being all they can be.” Similar to workaholics, sometimes workaholic as well, busyness rarely sit still. They live in the fast lane, compulsively over-scheduling their lives to protect themselves from free time – and the feelings that threaten to emerge when there is a break in their anesthetizing web of constant distraction.

Busyness are hyperactive caricatures of human beings. At their worst, busyness are like the nabib lizard, an African desert reptile that survives in scorching sand by constantly and rapidly alternating the feet it stands on.

Not all busyness are easily recognizable. We do not all travel at warp speed, and some of us manage such a variety of tasks that we appear quite functional, even enviable. Adding variety and number to our repertoire of treadmills however, does not necessarily mean we have withdrawn from the rat race.

I have had busyness stages in my life in which I tried to simultaneously balance several lifetimes' worth of activities: jogging to start the day, gardening before breakfast, homework at breakfast, personal phone calls on work breaks, errands for lunch, sports after work, meetings or classes after sports, dates after classes, and several hobbies to fill in those rare unscheduled spaces that invariably made me feel anxious.

At the height of my busyness, I discovered that if I sprinted home from work and then sprinted back to basketball, I could squeeze in twenty minutes for a “relaxing” meditation! The mere memory of those times makes me feel tired!

Like all compulsives, busyness are cut off from an unhurried appreciation of the subtle splendors of life. They rarely stop to notice the subtle changes in a garden, to taste the flavors in their food, or to bathe in the color of a friend's eyes. Let us dethrone the lord of productivity and take inspiration from Richard LeGallienne's poem:

*I meant to do my work today
But a brown bird sang in an apple tree,
And a butterfly flitted across the field
And all the leaves were calling me.*

BUSYHOLISM AND CODEPENDENCE

The most traumatic effects of growing up in an emotionally bankrupt home are the tendency to fall into addictive or compulsive behavior as an adult and the relationship response of codependency – the obsession with (and compulsiveness about) another person.

– Dennis Wholey

Children are bred into codependency when they are forced to perform tasks that are rightfully the responsibility of their parents. Many future codependents do all or most of the housework, meal preparation, and physical care of younger children. Some are their siblings' (and sometimes their parents') only source of emotional nurturance, and in the worst cases are prohibited or greatly restricted from playing outside with other children.

When a child is only valued for being helpful, she is in danger of becoming a compulsive helper. In my family, approval was so hard to come by that my sisters and I sometimes fought for the “honor” of helping my mother. I don't believe it is any coincidence that three out of the four of us are now helping professionals.

There is a particular type of codependent who becomes busyholic in her compulsive efforts to be of service. The epitome of this is the busyholic codependent who is so self-sacrificing that she develops a “Mother Teresa complex.” Her arduous dedication to serving makes dedicated social workers feel incompetent and slothful. She does so much for others that she appears saintly. However, unless she is indeed a candidate for canonization, she is merely hiding in other people's problems, often wearing a strained smile to cover the pain of her own unmet needs.

This type of codependency rarely brings any true sense of fulfillment to the individual. Living wholly for the satisfaction of others is as depleting as spoon-feeding others instead of eating. In *The Art of Loving* renowned psychoanalyst Erich Fromm comments on compulsive giving:

If an individual is able to love productively, he loves himself too; if he can love only others, he cannot love at all.

In our culture, early motherhood often requires considerable busyholic codependence because infants and toddlers are helpless and need constant attention. If a mother also holds down a regular job and gets little help from her spouse, she may become busyholic to the point of frenzy and exhaustion, and even develop serious physical or emotional problems.

Most women can survive the busyholic phase of early mothering without too much damage, if they do not become addicted to busyholism or let it take on unnecessary momentum. Unfortunately many women fail to gradually decrease their “caretaking” activities as their children grow older. Habituated to busyness and over-giving, they lose the ability to return to more relaxed, self-nurturing ways of being when they have the opportunity. Ironically, this is a disservice to both mother and child. A child's development is retarded when he is not required to

participate in his own care as he grows older. He will inevitably have trouble with intimacy if he does not learn to take care of himself. He will alienate his partner by expecting her to dote on him like an all-accommodating mother.

Effective grieving naturally diminishes compulsive helping. It reconnects us with our hurt about being used by our parents. It awakens an inner voice that plaintively asks denial-breaking questions like: “How come my sister acts as if I’m her mother?” “How come I always had to come straight home from school to help out?” “Why was Mom always telling me about her troubles and never even asking about my day at school?” “Why didn’t my parents come to the school play?” “Why doesn’t Dad ever remember my birthday?” “How come they never told me they were proud of me?”

Such experiences motivate us to claim the rights and needs that were usurped from us by parents who often acted as if they were the family’s only children. I see many clients emerge from deep grieving fired up to champion themselves. Some change jobs or go back to school; some leave abusive relationships and seek new friendships based on mutuality and respect; some begin to play, finally adventuring into pleasurable activities they were prohibited in childhood; and many, for the first time in their lives, go shopping for clothes and hairstyles that genuinely appeal to them.

Although this latter phenomenon may seem superficial at first, it is highly significant. Many of us were so thoroughly rejected by our parents that we falsely view ourselves as ugly. Many of our parents exacerbated our awful self-image by grooming us poorly and by outfitting us in unflattering clothes and hairstyles.

Whether our parents did this consciously or not, poor grooming rendered us even more controllable. It made us less appealing to others, and therefore less likely to have our self-esteem repaired outside the family.

I still cringe when I remember the neighborhood kids teasing me about the way my mother dressed me. In a rough New York City neighborhood, she forced me to wear hats that would make a clown feel humiliated, and then punished me severely when these hats were thrown into the sewer by various bullies.

I have another particularly painful recollection of being scornfully displayed in front of my second grade class as an example of filth by a demon-nun who actively hated me all that year because I came into *her* class with dirty fingernails, an unironed shirt, and unshined shoes.

I also feel a sense of disgust when I remember how ugly I felt in my school uniform (and how ugly it truly was!). For the first half of my adolescence, I felt ashamed whenever I even thought of approaching a girl I was attracted to. Surely she would recoil in disgust if I got too close to her.

How grateful I am for the role grieving has played in motivating me to take an interest in my appearance. For most of my life, it was incomprehensible that I would ever achieve this wonderful current state of liking my “looks.”

And what a delight it is to see so many of my clients growing in their attractiveness as they discover their own innate sense of style! When we take an active, creative interest in our appearance, we begin to heal the awful wound of being ugly in our own eyes.

Many survivors grow even more attractive as they learn to accept their feelings and become more authentic. Authenticity allows them to release the facial tension and postural contortion that accompanies emotional repression and forced smiling.

I believe that every person’s face has its own natural beauty, which I see in every child

who has not yet been taught to repress her feelings. This is very evident in cultures that do not punish children's emotional expression. Virtually every Moroccan, Tibetan, Balinese, and Aboriginal child I saw was radiantly beautiful.

A stunning example of the positive effects of open emotional expression on appearance can be seen in the 1985 movie *Mask*. Everyone I know who saw the film was initially disturbed by the physical distortion of the protagonist's face. Yet by the end of the film, almost everyone said they saw him as beautiful because he displayed such extraordinary authenticity and heartfulness in the unfoldment of his character. Faces freed from the contortion of disguising disowned inner experience often relax into the natural beauty that is innate.

HEALTHY COMPULSIVENESS

Everything in moderation, including excess.

– Herbie Monroe

There is, of course, nothing inherently unhealthy about sex, eating, working, busyness, or even the moderate use of mood-altering substances (excluding those that are highly addictive). Regarding the latter, the modern sage Allan Watts said:

I have no wish to defend my “vices” with propaganda, making out that they are in fact virtues which others should follow. I am only saying that I distrust people who show no sign of naughtiness or self-indulgence.

All our potentially compulsive behaviors are normal and enriching parts of life when used moderately. A modicum of ritualized and repetitive behavior in life is necessary and healthy. Our health depends on good habits of eating, exercising, sleeping, and personal hygiene. Learning a skill or a craft also requires repetition. Learning to read and write takes practice. Proficiency at sports or music requires much repetitive training. Most forms of work require compulsive-like behaviors.

In moderation, working hard and being busily productive are among the great joys of life. Moving rapidly and fluidly through a variety of complex tasks is a thrilling celebration of our anthropoid genius – of our ability to simultaneously invoke intelligence, strength, focus, grace, and dexterity.

Ironically, compulsive busyness robs us of much of this genius by creating a tension that inhibits our fluidity and grace of movement. Grieving releases this tension and heals the malady that afflicts so many adult children: the syndrome of dramatically fluctuating between the extremes of anxiety-driven hyperactivity and depression-induced listlessness. Grieving naturally restores our innate capacity to move smoothly through the multifarious, enriching gradations of purposeful activity that lie between intense, healthy excitation and full relaxation.

Grieving also reconnects us with the intuition and higher levels of intelligence that reside

in our deeper levels of consciousness. This, in turn, guides us to make healthier choices about how we use our time. I am often delighted by the irony that I actually accomplish more, qualitatively and quantitatively, as I increasingly free myself from the idolatry of deifying time-efficiency.

THE HEALTHY USE OF DEFENSES TO RETREAT FROM GRIEVING

We do not decrease defended-ness by hating it and rooting it out, but by understanding how necessary it was to defend against our grief when healthy mourning was not possible.

We generally need to wean ourselves from our defenses as gently as we would wean an infant from the breast: gradually over time, rather than all at once overnight. (Unfortunately alcoholics and drug addicts cannot gradually withdraw. Moderation in the use of psychoactive substances is not an option for them.)

Lessening defended-ness is a gradual process because grieving only incrementally reduces the pain we defend against. When more pain surfaces than we can deal with at any one time, we naturally reinvoke old defense mechanisms to retreat from grieving.

There are times when the recovery process is so emotionally overwhelming that focusing single-mindedly on work or some other distracting activity is a blessed relief. Many therapists approve of moderate “self-medication” in particularly enduring periods of grieving. An occasional beer or glass of wine can be appropriate for the nonalcoholic. The old-fashioned home remedy of ice cream can also be used by the abused and unabused alike with salutary effects in most cases. I know a psychiatrist who once told a client: “Take two scoops and call me in the morning.”

Using old compulsive behaviors to gain respite from “emotional overwhelm” is risky business, however. Denial can easily reawaken, run amok, and fully reinstate old habits at such times. This is especially true of working, cleaning, and eating compulsions which must be indulged to some degree on a daily basis. Those struggling to moderate these compulsions will probably reverberate with this statement, gleaned from a local recovery bulletin board:

Alcohol and other drug recovery is like dealing with a tiger in a cage.
Recovery from eating disorders is like taking that tiger out of the cage
three times a day and then taking it for a walk.

Since no one instantly achieves moderation, we need to be patient about our inevitable slips back into excess. Self-hatred about backsliding is usually counterproductive. Self-forgiveness and recommitment to moderation is typically much more effective.

WHEN RECOVERY BECOMES OBSESSIVE-COMPULSIVE

Listening to your heart, finding out who you are, is not simple. It takes time for the chatter to quiet down. In the silence of “not doing”

we begin to know what we feel. If we listen and hear what is being offered, then anything in life can be our guide. Listen.

– Sue Bender

Some survivors work so overdiligently at their recovery that they become what those versed in recovery terminology call “process junkies.” These survivors are constantly preoccupied with self-help exercises, perpetually thinking, reading, and talking about recovery. They eat, drink, and sleep self-improvement.

I was a process junkie for years until I realized I had traded in (and upgraded!) my old obsessive/compulsive defenses of ritualized thinking and busyness for a workaholic approach to recovery.

Over time my driven approach to recovery began creating more pain than it eliminated. Incessant negative self-analysis became a new way of distracting myself from feelings I hadn’t learned to tolerate. Compulsive “working on myself” degenerated into a revamped version of being driven by perfectionism. I was still proceeding from the destructive childhood belief that I had to be completely “fixed” to become acceptable to myself. My overzealousness was fueled by unresolved self-hatred and self-rejection.

We benefit greatly by guiding our recovery with the premise that we are already eminently deserving of self-acceptance. Below the layers of toxic shame and undigested grief that remain from our childhoods, we all know at heart that we are already truly worthy, loving, and lovable.

Survivors who are workaholic about their recovery benefit by balancing their self-improvement efforts with occasional regressions into self-indulgence. Will Schutz, former department head of the Holistic Studies Program at Antioch University, occasionally assigned his classes days of “endarkenment” to balance their marathon efforts at enlightenment. On those days students drank wine, ate sweets, danced, played games, told jokes and stories, and refused to focus on self-refinement. Most reported that the day helped them to reconnect with the lightheartedness of the child within, which in turn refocused them on attaining balance in their lives.

Stuart Smalley, the *Saturday Night Live* character who lampoons the recovery movement, wrote a delightful book that may help the workaholic recoveree lighten up. It’s whimsically entitled: *I’m Good Enough, I’m Smart Enough, and Doggone It, People Like Me!* It’s both hilarious and poignant, and there is considerable recovery wisdom veiled within its satire.

We must be tender with ourselves to lessen our compulsiveness and sense of urgency. When we have mercy on ourselves, grieving tempers our pace and frees us from driven-ness, once again bedazzling us with life. More and more often, we are moved by the lyrics and melodies of a song, by the delicate changes of light and color born in the play of the clouds and sun, by the feeling of warmth that comes from being fully present with a friend.

The great American poet Walt Whitman, who was known to liberally and unabashedly grieve, celebrated the rewards of a relaxed pace of life throughout his writings. This is particularly evident in this passage from his epic poem *Song of Myself*:

Beginning my studies the first step pleas’d me so much

*The mere fact consciousness, these forms, the power of motion,
The least insect or animal, the senses, eyesight, love,
The first step I say awed me and pleas'd me so much,
I have hardly gone and hardly wish'd to go any farther,
But stop and loiter all the time to sing it in ecstatic song.*

BLAME AND FORGIVENESS

BLAME IS NOT A “DIRTY WORD”

We were compelled to gratify our parents’ unconscious needs at the cost of our own self-realization . . . (we need) to experience the rebellion and mourning aroused by the fact that our parents were not available to fulfill our primary needs.

– Alice Miller

We are all born with a healthy sense of blame. *Blame* is an instinctual, angry response to unfairness. It is an innate impulse of self-protection. Blame is the reflex to call to account those who hurt us, and to refuse to take responsibility for wrongs and ills that are not our fault.

Blame, like sexual feeling, can be expressed in healthy or unhealthy ways. The safe, non-abusive venting of blame is essential to recovery. Healthy blaming allows us to release our stored up resentment about our childhood ordeals, freeing us from conscious or unconscious embitterment.

Many survivors find blame to be the most difficult emotion to accept, and view it as the ultimate sin of anger. Widespread social taboos prohibit children from blaming their parents even though dysfunctional parents typically blame their children relentlessly.

Dysfunctional parents hypocritically crush their children’s instincts to blame unfairness in toxically blaming ways. Most survivors were blasted with some version of the following when they tried to call a parent or real perpetrator to account: “Do as I say, not as I do!” “Don’t blame us! If you weren’t such a rotten kid, we wouldn’t have to hit you all the time.” “How dare you talk back to me, you insolent little brat. I’ll wash your mouth out with soap!” “Don’t try to get out of it by blaming your brother. You’re the troublemaker. You always start it.” “Don’t blame them! If you’re in trouble, you must have brought it on yourself!”

The instinct of blame is difficult to recover because these messages go off inside us the instant we begin to feel blame. This makes us feel so afraid, ashamed, or guilty that we immediately repress our blame, or turn it inward and blame ourselves for feeling blame! We need to renounce these messages about our healthy blame, or our denial about our childhood

losses will remain intact and we will be left holding the blame for all our parents' transgressions. We can enhance our recovery immeasurably by giving blame back to those who dumped it on us when we were too young and defenseless to refuse it.

LEARNED HELPLESSNESS AND TOXIC BLAME

You may be disappointed if you fail, but you are doomed if you don't try.

– Beverly Sills

*And the day came
When the risk to remain
Closed tightly in a bud
Became more painful
Than the risk it took
to blossom.*

– Author unknown

The child in the dysfunctional family learns early that it is too dangerous to act from her own will or desire. Because of this she is at risk of becoming an adult burdened by the condition of *learned helplessness*. Learned helplessness is seen in survivors who remain perpetually stuck in the powerlessness that was their only choice in childhood. While they were truly helpless in their families, they have yet to discover that they are now free to participate in forging their own destiny. If the adult child never pursues a path of recovery, she may never learn to take charge of her life. She may never realize that her parents no longer have any real power or control over her.

Blame becomes dysfunctional when it is chronically paired with learned helplessness. Some survivors use past unfairnesses to justify permanent surrender to present-time suffering. Although they were truly victimized by their parents, they devolve into allowing their past helplessness to solidify into a “victim” or “martyr complex.” Instead of using blame in a healthy way to empower recovery, they eternally blame the past, give up trying anything new, specialize in making excuses, and become convinced that life just “has it in for” them.

When this occurs blame has become toxic. *Toxic blame* is quite different from healthy blame. It is a hardened position of blame that is more of a choice and an attitude than it is a feeling. Toxic blame is a static frozen state that isolates a person from the fluid, dynamic richness of whole emotional being.

Toxic blame makes blame look ugly and often causes others to reject their own blame in an all-or-none way. It creates a condition in which “blame and shame begin to smell the same,” as an old friend of mine used to say.

This is not to say that helplessness is a black-and-white issue. Many of us had our initiative so obliterated in childhood that it is no easy task to claim a sense of power. It is not unusual in early recovery to experience long periods of feeling like a victim.

Sometimes even the thought of initiating a self-championing activity triggers a flashback

of feeling overwhelmed and incapacitated. Intense emotional flashbacks of feeling small, powerless, and helpless may in fact occur at any stage of recovery. How could it be otherwise for survivors who truly suffered many years of severe victimization?

Nonetheless, blame must eventually be transformed from a justification for helplessness into a righteous self-protective indignation that stirs us into empowerment. The voice of such indignation might sound like this:

I absolutely refuse to let the wounds of my childhood stop me any longer from championing and protecting myself. I am not going to let the vestiges of my parents' abuse scare me out of doing what is good for me. I will not remain permanently deprived of what I need and want. No matter how frightened I feel, I will at least sometimes "feel the fear and do it anyway." I am going to speak up and stand up for myself, and pursue my birthright to the good things in life.

Pursuing personal goals in the face of fear is how the survivor gets living proof that he is no longer a helpless victim. Those who do not act until their fear is completely resolved often come to the end of their life without having acted. Survivors struggling with this issue are referred to Casey Chaney's book *Ready, Willing & Terrified: A Coward's Guide to Risk-Taking*.

If you have grieved extensively over time and have not experienced a spontaneous shift into wanting to take action to improve your life, then you may need a therapist to guide and encourage your self-championing. Classes in assertiveness training may also be helpful if you are experiencing this impasse in your recovery.

BLAME AS HEALTHY SELF-PROTECTION

I never, absolutely never, side with anyone who is against my welfare. I aid nobody who detracts from my dignity, who makes me feel less than human either through subhuman onslaughts or superhuman demands. I fight or avoid people whose effect is ultimately destructive to my validity as a person, or who in any way dilute my ability to take myself seriously.

– Theodore Rubin

It is normal, healthy, and necessary to occasionally feel blame towards others whether or not we were traumatized in childhood. All human beings, like most animals, are born with an instinct of self-protection that automatically responds to hurt with blaming anger. The victim who screams out "Back off!" or "Stop! Thief!" is instinctively expressing blame.

Blame is an integral part of the essential survival skill of identifying aggression and resisting its perpetration. In a world where too many prey upon the powerless, we sometimes need blame to identify and protect ourselves from being victimized.

As the survivor recovers her ability to feel blame about past injustices, she often simultaneously improves her ability to recognize unfairnesses in the present. Recognition is the

first step in learning to confront and stop abuse. Feelings of blame and anger are often important clues that something unfair is happening. These feelings are the psyche's most instinctive warning signals of abuse.

The emotion of blame is also a powerful tool for confronting and ending abuse. The healthy expression of blame creates a very real internal experience of courage and powerfulness. It can move the survivor instantly out of paralyzing fear and helplessness into feelings of strength and safety.

The practice of blaming abusive behavior gives the inner child something she has been waiting for all her life: a sense that she can use anger to protect herself in times of danger. It awakens her to the fact that she now lives in an adult body. She is now bigger, stronger, and more capable of championing herself.

Blame encourages us, like nothing else, to face fearful and necessary life-challenges. It helps us establish our basic rights of self-expression (see [Appendix B](#)), and call to account anyone who tries to deny them. Blame allows us to say no to unwanted requests or offers, and to hostile words or actions. It opens our eyes to currently unfair situations that we may be tolerating as if we were still powerless children. It allows us to recapture the natural lionheartedness of unwounded children.

NO RECOVERY VS. RECOVERING “NO”

Without this “no” I am indefensible against the demands of other people and their desires, and even casual statements are often felt by me as demands. Because I can’t say “no”, then their demands become commands I must comply with even in advance of anyone’s request of me.

– Theodore Rubin

A toddler's angry “No!” at another's attempt to take his food or toy is an early and instinctual expression of blame. The child's *no* says that the behavior of taking his property is blameworthy and rightfully resistible. *No* is his way of setting limits and establishing healthy boundaries.

Without the response of *no*, the child is vulnerable to exploitation. Studies of child molesters show that they can recognize the body language of a child who has been stripped of her right to say *no*. Ironically, many children are absolutely forbidden to say *no* to all authority figures, and yet are expected to “just say no to drugs.”

Theodore Rubin wrote powerfully about the healthy blaming aspects of being able to say *no* in *Compassion & Self-Hate*:

I must have the right to say “No.” Only I can give myself this right on a meaningful basis . . . My no is a function of some of the deepest compassionate feelings for myself. This no of mine represents whatever force I can bring against anything in me or outside of me

which I recognize as being antithetical to my wellbeing . . . *No* is my block and fortress to and against self-hate. *No* is my stand against impossible demands wherever they come from.

As a child develops, he learns more sophisticated ways of defending his rights and boundaries. “That’s not fair” is one of the first phrases of healthy blame that a child learns.

Most children have an exquisite inborn sense of fairness. They will instinctively protest parental mistreatment as unfair until this healthy blaming response is punished out of them.

Many dysfunctional parents wrathfully attack their children whenever they say *no* or *that’s not fair*. Most children learn quickly that they must accept and, by implication, “forgive” all parental behavior, no matter how abusive. Many survivors have *no* and *that’s not fair* extinguished from their vocabulary so early in life that they have no memory of being traumatized into repressing their normal blaming responses to unfair parenting practices.

I believe children repress their earliest memories of their parents’ rageful oppression in the same way that adults repress their perception of gruesome accidents. If I suddenly come across something shockingly violent, my instinctive response might be as follows: “Oh God, that’s so awful, I can’t even look at it . . . I don’t even want to think about it! I just want to get that picture out of my mind! I’m never going to think about that again. Don’t even remind me of it.”

In a similar way, I believe many children banish memories of what befell them when they tried to stand up to their parents. Since I have recovered memories of my mother’s livid, veins-bulging face screaming a tidal wave of terrifying hot red energy in my direction, I thoroughly understand why my toddler-self needed to banish that picture from my consciousness.

Those who were traumatized out of their blame in early childhood frequently become adults who can’t even entertain the notion that their parents might in any way be justifiably blamed. Yet deep inside them, they still harbor unconscious infernos of unprocessed rage and blame about being tyrannized as children.

When we allow ourselves to feel and express blame, we potently diminish our denial. Blame often opens our eyes to the truth that great harm was done to us through no fault of our own. We were not born bad or defective. We deserved love and respect, as does every child. Had we been given it, we would now find it easy to nurture and protect ourselves. We would not have histories of tolerating gross unfairness from other authority figures throughout our lives. Our ability to like ourselves would not be limited merely to the times when we are happy, pleasing others or performing at our peaks.

TOO SHAMED TO BLAME

The emotionally abused child inevitably struggles to “explain” the conduct of his abusers – and ends up struggling for survival in a quicksand of self-blame.

– Andrew Vachss

Myriad shaming cliches demand that we eschew blame and help ourselves by simply choosing to forgive. Many of us have been patronized with “friendly” advice: “Forgiveness is the sign of an advanced soul!” “Jesus forgave, why can’t you?” “Your mother did the best she could. Life was tough on her too! Shouldn’t you be more understanding?” “How can you blame your parents after all they did for you?” “Stop blaming your parents and get on with your life.” (I like to reply to this last rebuke by saying: “It wasn’t until I put the blame where it belonged that I found the power to effectively get on with my life.”)

The hackneyed admonishments listed above can be very difficult to resist, especially if our parents have encrusted our guilt with claims that they worked their fingers to the bone, sacrificed everything, and never wanted anything for themselves. Many survivors allow these false myths to shame them out of reclaiming healthy blame.

Moreover, calls to forgiveness in Christ’s name are both shaming and hypocritical, for Jesus “modeled” that it was justifiable to blame bad behavior. He raged at the money-changers who defiled the temple by plying their trade there. He angrily confronted the apostles who fell asleep and left him unguarded while he grieved in the garden. From the cross, he even expressed grave disappointment with his own father: “My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?”

And even if our parents did the best they could, does this change the fact that we were grievously hurt and diminished by their incompetence? Will this understanding mystically dissolve the righteous anger we carry for the innumerable times we were unfairly punished or left painfully wanting? The fact that they did the best they could is a compelling extenuating circumstance that may eventually help us feel forgiving toward them, but it will not magically neutralize the magma of unexpressed blame trapped inside us.

When we forgive before we blame, we risk dragging the full weight of our childhood hurt and anger around forever. Before I learned to safely “cathart” out my blame, I was like an exhausted backpacker, too dissociated and naive to notice that someone had put a boulder in my pack.

It is simply not possible to forgive our parents when we are still in denial about how much they hurt us. Unresolved childhood pain and blame make it emotionally and physically impossible for us to soften or relax when we are near them. The child in us remains terrified that we won’t take them to task if they try to hurt us again. We therefore reflexively retreat into our customary hypervigilance or dissociation around them. This defended-ness makes it impossible for us to drop down into our hearts to feel genuinely forgiving toward them. Sometimes it prevents us from feeling any real emotional warmth for them at all.

Our fear of our parents cannot be resolved without recognizing their blameworthiness, no matter how much we believe we forgive them. If we are ever to become truly relaxed and loving around our parents, we must permit ourselves to blame their hurtful behaviors.

ANGER OUT THE BLAME

It is the aggression-phobic society, demanding the suppression of negative feelings, that is most vulnerable to the bizarre acts of violence that have become a part of our culture . . . society will begin to cherish those who risk expression of their aggressive feelings and

who seek out ways of doing this constructively.

– George Bach and Herb Goldberg, *Creative Aggression*

Let me reiterate that most survivors don't need to directly blame their parents. Most parents can tolerate little, if any, feedback about their poor performances in child-rearing. This does not make it impossible for us to feel forgiving toward them. We can vent blame without them being present in ways that invoke feelings of forgiveness.

Angering out the blame is a term I use to describe safe, harmless expressions of blame. Angering out the blame typically begins with the decision to allow old memories of parental ill-treatments into awareness. As these recollections emerge, we then imagine we are standing before our parents, blaming them for the ways they hurt us. We can do this out loud or silently in the privacy of our own minds.

There are a variety of techniques, commonly known as Gestalt or psychodrama, in which survivors can enact confronting their parents in the past. Safe and potent releases from old hurt occur when we imagine ourselves blaming and stopping their abuses. Many of my clients report experiencing great relief after "role-plays" in which they denounce their parents' unfair behaviors. Many are simultaneously shocked and delighted to hear themselves angrily exclaiming "No!" and "That's not fair!"

One of my clients experienced a very profound release when she performed a role-play in which she was a judge in a courtroom trying her parents for being derelict in their child-rearing duties. After calling them to account for a host of injustices, she found them guilty, and punished them for their cruel selfishness in exactly the same ways she had been punished as a child.

The efficacy of such techniques is usually proportionate to the intensity of the recoveree's chastising and to the degree that he gives a full, detailed account of his parents' unfairness.

Angering out the blame can be done alone or with witnesses. Witnessing that is nonshaming often enhances the therapeutic value of these exercises, although some survivors need solitude at first to feel safe enough to angrily indict their parents.

We can also work through blame by writing separately to each of our parents, blaming them as specifically and fully as possible for all their parenting transgressions. Such letters are not designed to be actually sent, but rather to release as much blame as possible through vehement and uninhibited repudiation. Some survivors later edit these letters into more tactful versions of their just complaints and mail them in the hope of opening up an honest dialogue about the past with their parents.

If you still feel uneasy about doing blame work, you might try the following spiritual exercise. Imagine your Higher Self asking the Higher Selves of your parents for permission to role-play your anger at them for the higher purpose of completing unfinished business between you. Tell them you are doing this so that your old undealt-with anger won't radiate out unconsciously and continuously in their direction. Deepen this intention by expressing hope that this harmless venting will lead to enhanced intimacy in your relationships.

If this does not awaken your desire to representationally scold and reprimand your parents, you may still benefit from abstractly expressing your blame. You can anger out your blame solely at their unfair actions or, if this still seems too personal, at the general unfairness of life. Instead of yelling: "I'm angry at you Mom and Dad," you can rage at life: "I'm furious! I hate it that there's so much pain and unfairness in childhood and in life!" or simply "I'm furious

and I'm just plain pissed off!" Sometimes this practice brings healing in itself, and sometimes it gradually opens the door to more specificity in denouncing the injustices of childhood.

When parental abuse has been habitual and long-term, old unexpressed blame may be so great that it needs to be acted out with intense rage. Many survivors are initially disturbed by this prospect because they unconsciously fear that the release of their accumulated anger will lead to "madness and mayhem." Indeed, many become inhibitingly frightened because their as-yet, unfelt fury about childhood trauma sometimes surfaces with homicidal thoughts and images. Yet homicidal ideation, in this instance, is little more than a sign that the psyche is holding a very large charge of anger. It is a form of drasticizing that evaporates quickly with a safe, active release of the underlying rage.

Experiences of safely expressing full-fledged rage free the survivor of his fear that he will one day run amok. Harmless venting of homicidal feelings invariably brings tremendous relief and life-altering gain. Anger never again needs to be feared, and can actually be befriended. The survivor learns firsthand that rageful feelings are quite different than rageful actions, and that they can be fully and harmlessly felt and emoted. What a wonderful paradox that the safe letting go of control actually insures us that control will not be lost destructively! Safe angering insures this won't occur because it prevents rage from becoming an explosive pressure cooker without a release valve.

Angering out the blame commonly improves our interactions with our parents in real life. We can let down our guard around them because we have finally achieved a sense of self-protection. They too can relax around us because we no longer unconsciously broadcast hostility at them, and this allows them to be more relaxed around us. Some of us are then lucky enough to discover that our parents have evolved over the years and are no longer the ominous persecutors of yore. In such cases, family relationships may finally become truly loving.

Some survivors are not so lucky, however, and no amount of blame work can create a relaxing atmosphere around parents who are still malicious. In such cases it is appropriate to assertively, and if necessary angrily, protest any subsequent maltreatment by our parents. If this is not effective, contact with parents should be minimized or ended, as ongoing abuse of any type impedes recovery.

I have worked with a number of clients whose progress in years of therapy was minimal until they drastically reduced their contact with still-abusive parents. Many of these same clients grew by leaps and bounds in the months following their withdrawal from these toxic relationships. This was even true in cases where the contact had only been by telephone.

If you remain unconvinced that you are harboring blame toward your parents, you might want to try this exercise. Take a moment to imagine your mother's and father's faces as vividly as possible. Now shift your awareness to what is happening in your body as you visualize them. What are you experiencing in the muscles of your jaw, throat, chest, and belly? Are you breathing deeply and easily? Is your body relaxed?

If you find that you have become tense or hypervigilant, you might want to experiment with an exercise of angering out the blame to see if it releases any of your tension. If now is not a good time to cathart, remind yourself that you are safe here in the present and let your muscles and your breath relax. Perhaps you will find a time and place later on to relieve yourself of this old burden.

REPETITION COMPULSION, BLAME, AND PREMATURE FORGIVENESS

Masochists are not in love with pain. They are in love with sadists.

– Carl Jung

Many emotionally abused children engage in a lifelong drive for the approval (which they translate as “love”) of others. So eager are they for love – and so convinced they don’t deserve it – that they are prime candidates for abuse within intimate relationships.

– Andrew Vachss

Recovering blame helps us to avoid the pitfall of premature forgiveness called *repetition compulsion*. Repetition compulsion is the dynamic of the psyche that unconsciously impels adult children to enter the same kinds of destructive relationships over and over again. An understanding of this dynamic helps us to resist unconscious attractions to harmful people, and to stop relating to significant others as if they have the same absolute power over us as our parents did.

The following sketch of my mother’s abusiveness is offered to illustrate a specific example of repetition compulsion. It demonstrates how premature forgiveness leaves us vulnerable and oblivious to reenactments of parental abuse and neglect in adult relationships.

I “forgave” my mother long before I realized there was anything to forgive. I forgave her because, unlike my father, she was sometimes nice to me. I forgave her because I minimized her vitriolic criticalness by comparing it to my father’s frequent backhanded blows to my head. I forgave her because I had no memory of the frequent beatings she gave me as a toddler when her hands were not too arthritic to hit me with full force.

(My body shudders involuntarily now as her deathbed confession reechoes inside me: “I used to really crack you around, Peter!” She uttered the word *crack* chillingly and onomatopoeically.)

I forgave my mother until my recovery work began to unearth memories of her abuse. Unfortunately, I soon took the advice of a recovery “expert” and forgave her again just as I started to feel anger toward her. I was persuaded to “let bygones be bygones” long before they were actually bygones – long before I realized I was letting my partners treat me as scornfully as she had.

This false forgiveness masked the abusiveness of my relationships for years, until a spontaneous opening to blame caused me to recant my forgiveness and resume the reconstruction of my childhood abuse picture. As I reopened to grieving, I began to recall how frightening and painful it was to be around my mother. Throughout my childhood, she relentlessly manipulated and punished me with no-win situations. With no healthy means of releasing her anger, she was the typical dysfunctional parent who unconsciously creates double-bind situations to justify venting her rage at her children.

I was in danger any time my mother needed a release, and she was so miserable as a young mother that she often needed one. There was no safe harbor at such times. If I was talking, she would suddenly snarl that I was a “blabbermouth” and know-it-all; if I was silent, she would

berate me for not having anything to say for myself: “Are you a moron or has the cat got your tongue?” If I was playing, she would smack me and tell me to sit still; if I was resting, she would pick at me for being lazy and good-for-nothing. If I was entertaining myself, she would become incensed at my selfishness for only thinking about myself; if I sought to help her she would scorn and dismiss me as a nuisance who got on her nerves and could not keep out of her hair. When my mother was feeling angry, whatever I was about, I should have been about something else.

On any of these occasions, if her anger had peaked enough, her verbal abuse might be reinforced with hair-pulling, a slap to the face, or a kick. Like her father she found it amusing to hit me with her fist unexpectedly in the back of the head; she would then laugh and say: “That’s for nothing. Do something and see what you get!”

Eventually she stopped hitting me (because her arthritis finally made it truly hurt her more than it did me), and relied solely on sarcasm and criticism to release her anger. I was shamed into believing that her vicious put-downs, like her hits to the head, were not destructive or hurtful to me because they were only jokes; besides, she did not “have a nasty bone in her body.”

My mother could twist anything I said into proof that I deserved belittlement. Phrases that were considered clever or amusing one day were later cited as proof of my stupidity. Over time I learned to be extremely guarded about what I had to say. I felt as if I and my words were both walking on eggshells; “talking on eggshells” as a friend of mine puts it.

My relationship with my mother set me up via repetition compulsion to attract and endure her kind of critical hurtfulness in many relationships. Fortunately, I didn’t submit to repetitions of her physical abuse unlike the many battered spouses who are almost always survivors of childhood battering.

I suffered my mother’s brand of verbal and emotional abuse for years. Having few communication skills and little to say for myself, I was poorly defended against partners who had mastered the use of language to unfairly wield power (see “Verbal Abuse” in [Chapter 8](#)).

Much of the time I didn’t even realize that my partners’ double binds, verbal scapegoating, and out-and-out emotional “dumping” was injurious to me. Being screamed at and picked on seemed a normal part of a relationship to me. Being a source of frequent disappointment and having little but my shortcomings noticed seemed normal fare. Being compared unfavorably to others seemed like a helpful way to get me to perfect myself.

And so, I unprotestingly endured my partners’ ongoing, humiliating analyses of me. I even bolstered their critiques with my own shaming self-analyses, replaying the obsequious stance my mother demanded. As a child I asked myself countless times: “Why can’t I just be good so mommy will like me? What can I do to please her? How can I change so she won’t hate me?”

Like that child, I worked hard to find and rectify the faults that made my partners so disappointed and rageful with me. I acquiesced to being held responsible for all the problems in these relationships just as I had with my mother who convinced me I was the inveterate cause of all her upsets. Having left my family with my self-esteem in shreds, it was easy to unconsciously give my partners all the power that I had “given” to my mother. How could I know that truly loving partners are respectful, compromising, and willing to own their “contribution” to problems and issues in a relationship?

In a further repetition of the dynamic with my mother, I also accepted neglect without protest. How was I to know that healthy love includes generous amounts of positive feedback? I was “clueless” about my need for acknowledgement and appreciation. Rarely affirmed by either

parent, I easily accepted this same lack of validation in these relationships. Rare instances of positive attention were relished tidbits for which I was very grateful. These crumbs kept me emotionally alive but malnourished, even though they seemed sustaining in contrast to the emotional starvation of my childhood.

My repetition compulsion also caused me to take on caretaking roles with my partners. Having completed an internship in codependency with my mother, I routinely sacrificed my needs to make sure my partners were well attended. This was second nature for me as they were martyrs like my mother. They radiated a sense of entitlement that implicitly said: “My pain is so much greater than yours that we must focus all our energy and attention on my obviously more important needs.”

One of the inherited ways in which I took care of my partners was to do most of the listening. This commonly involved reenactments of the no-win situations with my mother in which I could never get listening “right.” Both my mother and my partners routinely attacked me for my listening faux pas. If they were in a bad mood and needed someone to be angry with, there was no safe listening posture. If I focused my attention too much on what they were saying, I was told that I was trying too hard and making them nervous; if I relaxed my attention, I was told I was drifting off and not really interested; if I asked a question to show my interest, I was distracting them; if I listened quietly and attentively, I wasn’t eliciting enough and didn’t have anything to say for myself; if I came forth with my own thoughts I was selfishly interrupting.

This is not to say I was blameless for the problems in my adult relationships. My acceptance of my impoverished self-expression and my inability to insist on my right to be equally heard was a major contribution to the dysfunction in these relationships. Survivors who remain mute and uncommunicative, and who do not work on regaining their ability to express themselves arouse normal frustrations in their partners.

Nonetheless, my truncated self-expression was also a major part of my repetition compulsion. Years of abuse crippled my speech so thoroughly that I came into relationships unconsciously believing that talking itself was dangerous. I was subliminally convinced that anything I said around the woman who had “replaced” my mother would be picked apart, shamed, and even seen as cause for a mom-like “sneak-attack” slap to the face.

(As I write this, and thus verbally ventilate it to a wider audience, I cry more tears and feel angry blame as I see the confused and frightened look on my five-year-old face as I get slapped again for the umpteenth time in the middle of some innocent utterance.) Repetition compulsion is as self-perpetuating as all other compulsions.

I became increasingly speechless for many years because I was drawn to partners like my mother who were not only poor listeners but excessively critical of my self-expression. I remained stuck in old patterns of relating because I naively took the execrable advice that I would not heal unless I first decided to forgive. And who of all people is more forgivable than mom? And who of all people, outside of God, is it more blasphemous to blame?

I remained stuck for a number of years in superficial but hard-shelled forgiveness making little progress in my recovery. I resisted many therapeutic attempts to address what lay beneath my fossilized forgiveness. Forgiving my mother without blaming her for forcing me to take refuge in silence could have made me a conversational black hole forever.

I have since learned that my forgiveness was a stalwart defense against the awful pain that finally emerged when I really “got” that my mother actively hated me for many long periods of my childhood. What a terrible awakening it was to realize that Mom’s love was little more than a

string of hypocritical parenting clichés. How painful it was to fully feel the hollowness of her favorite homilies, “I only want the best for you” and “I’m only doing this (hurting you) because I love you.”

I finally began to crack through my tough veneer of false forgiveness one desolate evening in my early thirties. On that night a miracle of grace allowed me to rage blasphemously at God. I raged blame at the Higher Power and wept about divine injustice for hours. I raged about all the terrible unfairnesses and cruelties of life, and wept for all my pain and all the pain of others.

When I exhausted my rage, I was astounded to suddenly experience an overflowing abundance of love and self-compassion. How wonderful that I had not invoked the immediate divine retribution I had half expected. No bolts of lightning! No earthquakes! No devils suddenly appearing to whisk me off to hell!

I vacillated between tears of relief and joy for “eternal” moments. I laughed out loud in delight as I suddenly recalled George Bernard Shaw’s wise pronouncement: “All great truths begin as blasphemies.”

I was then emblazoned by an intensely vivid image of the Higher Power chuckling in delight, much as a healthy parent does when s/he is amused by a toddler’s cute and harmless instinctive acts of defiance. At last I knew incontrovertibly that I was intrinsically a good person, and not some demonic ingrate who had purposefully tried to make my mother’s life a living hell.

This sense of grace then expanded into an understanding that the all-compassionate Creator who made everything accepts the full “blasphemous” expression of our anger because it too is a divine creation. Such harmless blaming empties us of life-alienating blame and restores our hearts to their natural capacity for compassion and love.

My “prayer” of blasphemy culminated with an epiphany that my deepest grief concerned the loss of the glorious sense of oneness and connectedness that I, like all human beings, resided in before being born into this world. This emotionally-based remembering left me with an unshakeable faith that this Oneness is the ultimate reality to which we all inevitably return. Lao-Tzu wrote about this:

*Let your heart be at peace.
Watch the turmoil of beings,
but contemplate their return.
Each separate being in the universe
returns to the common source.
Returning to the source is serenity . . .
When you realize where you come from,
you naturally become . . .
kindhearted as a grandmother,
dignified as a king.
Immersed in the wonder of the Tao,
you can deal with whatever life brings you,
and when death comes, you are ready.*

This experience was a miraculous turning point in my life, leaving me convinced that it is normal and healthy to angrily blame and complain about unfairness. I have since had many healing experiences of being restored to love through catharting directly at God and Life, and indirectly at my parents and loved ones. I have also been privileged to witness many others experiencing this remarkable transformation through fully owning and expressing their blame.

THE HEALING AMBIVALENCE OF FEELING BOTH FORGIVENESS AND BLAME

*Take your practiced powers and stretch them out until they span the
chasm between two contradictions . . . For the god wants to know
himself in you.*

– Rilke

The “blasphemous” experience described above encouraged me to make my mother the subject of my angering out the blame exercises. On the other side of one particularly intense role-play of catharting blame at my mother, I felt my heart open with more love for her than I had ever felt before. This feeling of love then expanded into compassion for her and finally culminated in an authentic feeling of forgiveness.

This feeling of forgiveness felt so wonderful that I clung to it *thinking* I was still experiencing it far longer than I actually was. Eventually, however, my unconscious cauldron of blame, which had not yet been significantly emptied, percolated back up into awareness and I felt enraged at her once again and certain she was anything but forgivable. When I then allowed myself to anger out this new wave of blame, a genuine feeling of forgiveness returned.

Hoping that I had finally “gotten over it (my anger)” and achieved permanent forgiveness, I once again clung to this feeling until yet another wave of blame resurfaced, awakening me to a “new” aspect of my childhood loss.

In the early stages of this cyclic process, I split off into entrenched positions of forgiveness or blame many times as my denial progressively crumbled and gave way to an increasingly accurate perception of my childhood.

As my recovery progressed, these polarizations became less dramatic and enduring until I had transformative experiences of pure healing ambivalence, of simultaneously feeling both blame and forgiveness for my mother. These experiences have convinced me that both emotions are intrinsic to us and that some fluctuating between blame and forgiveness will always be necessary and helpful.

Years of oscillating between these two emotions have also convinced me that I will always eventually return to forgiving feelings for my mother, no matter how incensed I feel on any given occasion. I believe this allows me to authentically say that I forgive her, even though I will no doubt at times feel blaming toward her.

Blame may rearise toward my mother whenever I struggle in the present with some vestige of her inhibiting influence. In fact, I believe I can only legitimately say that I forgive my mother because these vestiges have greatly diminished. If I had not resolved a great deal of the repetition compulsion that drew me to “silencing” and punishing partners, my experience of her would rarely be truly forgiving.

Moreover, when I say that I forgive my mother, I state this in the same sense that I say I love my friends. I can authentically say that I love my long-term friends, even though I don't constantly feel loving toward them, because my loving feelings have consistently returned over the years despite normal phases of neutrality, distance, or disappointment.

Functional parents love their children in a similar way. Although they do not always feel love for them, they return to loving feelings frequently enough to trust that love is their "bottom line." Many dysfunctional parents do not achieve this kind of emotional flexibility because they do not learn and practice safe and nonabusive methods of venting their normal anger at their children.

Active anger management is a crucial parenting skill because it is impossible to make the many "unfair" sacrifices parenting requires without incurring some feelings of anger and blame. Parents are encouraged to use the techniques of angering in [Chapter 4](#) to safely express and let go of their anger so that it does not get taken out on their children. If parents' feelings of frustration are not safely vented, they will inevitably accumulate and explode against their children. This hurts not only the children but also the parents by destroying the loving connection between them. When this occurs everyone loses out on love.

The authentic emotional experience of "I love" or "I forgive" depends upon a willingness to experience anger or blame at least occasionally. I have lost the beautiful emotional substance of love and forgiveness many times by deceiving myself with the illusion that I am finally above getting mad.

Whenever I try to concretize forgiveness by denying rearising feelings of blame towards my mother, I begin to feel very distant and cut off from her in my heart. This becomes obvious to me when I look at pictures of her and feel a tightening somewhere in my body. When I focus inwards on this tightness, I find hurt feelings that once fully felt or expressed leave me feeling compassionate toward her once again.

BLAME AS AN ONGOING PROCESS

Reconstruction of the past in order to make sense of the present turns into an ongoing process: one, in fact, that proceeds throughout one's life.

– Sheldon Roth

Although I have felt a great deal of real forgiveness for my mother, her abusive and neglectful behaviors will always remain blameworthy – as do all such behaviors. Remembering this helps me whenever I reexperience difficulty with my self-expression. Suddenly becoming tongue-tied usually "tips me off" that I am having an emotional flashback to the fear and shame that are by-products of her myriad attacks on my self-expression.

When these flashbacks threaten to silence me, I reinvoke blame to remind myself how unfair it was that I was squelched in this way. Blame usually rebuffs these ghostly hindrances of fear and shame, and empowers my commitment to say what I want and need to say.

As I wrote that last paragraph, I felt a great sense of joy about how much this process has helped me. Sometimes I can hardly believe that it is me who now commonly enjoys so many rich

and multidimensional conversations. How wonderful this death of the habit of dissecting and second-guessing every other thing I have to say!

Every human being needs to renounce destructive criticism. Reinstated blame automatically reminds us we are right to fight abuse, whether it is the internal echoing of parental shamings or the insults of new abusers.

BLAME AND SHAME

Shame is the greatest form of domestic violence in this country.

– John Bradshaw

Toxic shame is a severely debilitating internal state characterized by extreme feelings of humiliation and relentless thoughts of self-loathing. Toxic shame was first identified by John Bradshaw in *Healing the Shame That Binds*:

When shame has been completely internalized, nothing about you is okay. You feel flawed and inferior; you have the sense of being a failure. There is no way you can share your inner self because you are an object of contempt to yourself. When you are contemptible to yourself, you are no longer you.

Bradshaw contrasts toxic shame with healthy shame. Healthy shame is the natural and relatively mild feeling of self-disapproval we instinctively experience when we hurt ourselves or someone else. Healthy shame commonly mutates into toxic shame when dysfunctional parents continuously treat their children as if they are grossly and fundamentally flawed.

Many adult children are instantly inundated with toxic shame whenever they think, feel or act in ways previously forbidden by their parents. When toxic shame strikes, it spreads contemptuous self-criticism and drasticizing throughout consciousness like a wildfire. It infects us like a rapidly spreading virus, jaundicing every facet of our self-perception with self-hatred. It commonly causes us to feel hopeless and exhausted. At its worst, it makes us wish we were dead. Many survivors spend inordinate amounts of their waking lives suffering from toxic shame.

I believe toxic shame is a type of emotional flashback in which we view ourselves with the same disgust we saw reflected in our parents' faces whenever they acted as if they were repulsed by us. Toxic shame freezes us in the fear, mortification, and hopelessness of our most traumatic times in childhood. To the degree that our parents acted as if they couldn't stand the sight of us, to that same degree are we prone to toxic shame attacks of feeling bad, worthless, and ugly.

Toxic shame is an extremely powerful weapon of control. As Bradshaw has pointed out, toxic shame is commonly used in dysfunctional families to make children believe that their innocent mistakes are proof that they themselves are unpardonable mistakes. Parents routinely use toxic shame to dismiss children's needs and to extinguish their ability to assert themselves

and protest (or even notice) abuse and neglect.

Furthermore, most dysfunctional parents react so negatively to their children's feelings, that children eventually feel shame whenever an emotion arises. Because of this, adult children rarely experience their feelings in a pure, uncompromised way. Toxic shame immediately colors prohibited feelings like anger, sadness, and fear with degradation, making these feelings immeasurably more painful and unpalatable than any unsullied emotion could ever be.

As well as poisoning our emotions, toxic shame also impedes recovery by instantly snuffing out the urge to reengage arrested developmental processes. Natural, reemerging drives to grow and mature are often doused by shame before they can even become conscious. In early recovery, I had no idea that many of my sudden tailspins into shame were triggered by short-lived desires to fulfill forbidden needs or claim denied rights. I was subliminally castrated by innumerable variations of: "How dare you think you deserve some attention, a chance to speak or undisturbed time alone! Who the hell do you think you are saying *no* and refusing a request?"

Many short-lived attempts at recovery end because every impulse toward betterment and self-fulfillment triggers an incapacitating attack of toxic shame. This is also why so many survivors in early recovery look confused and dismayed when someone suggests they have legitimate needs, rights, and feelings to recover.

THE INNER CRITICAL PARENT

Many of us live as if our parents are inside us dictating the course of our lives. In many dysfunctional families, parents are like conquistadors who conquer, colonize, and rule the choice areas of their children's minds. Unfortunately, leaving the family rarely offers any real escape from parental dictatorship. Many parents infiltrate their children's deepest privacy and leave behind a cruel feudal lord who still enslaves them. This despotic ruler is the inner critical parent.

The *inner critical parent* is the faultfinding mental process that runs a constant negative commentary on us. It is that part of our psyche that has been trained to look for what's wrong with us rather than what's right. It forces us to pay allegiance to our parents' rules, standards, tastes, and evaluations, and enforces its rule with punishing attacks of toxic shame.

The inner critical parent, also commonly called the critic, the inner critic, the false self, and the internalized parent, is usually a conglomerate of both our parents, as well as other formative childhood authority figures. The inner parent relentlessly judges us, orders us about, and talks to us in the same demeaning ways that our parents did.

The critic also glowers at us while it picks us apart. Experiences of toxic shame are often initiated by the barely perceptible images of our scowling parents. These images are often below the threshold of awareness. We rarely allow them into awareness. We learned early to reflexively repress our perceptions of the awful "looks" of disgust and hate on our parents' faces. Human beings instinctively banish images from their consciousness that are too frightening or painful to observe. Nonetheless, repeated exposure to our parents' repelled and rageful countenances left their shaming images deeply imprinted on our psyches.

The impressed images of our parents' menacing visages are extremely formidable. Whether we perceive them or not, they frown at our fledgling attempts at self-development while their debasing messages berate us as selfish, stupid, hopeless, etc., for trying to help ourselves.

This tyranny of the inner critical parent keeps many of us in a permanent, regressed state of powerlessness and helplessness. As Bradshaw says:

This inner critical observation is excruciating. It generates a tormenting self-consciousness which Kaufman describes as, “creating a binding and paralyzing effect upon the self.” This paralyzing internal monitoring causes withdrawal, passivity, and inaction.

When we do not challenge this condition, we forfeit our inborn sense of identity to the internalized parent. We become so identified with the critic’s judgments and beliefs that we virtually become the inner critical parent ourselves. We may even scowl at ourselves exactly as our parents did while we mindlessly parrot their judgments, habitually branding ourselves bad, worthless, ugly or pathetic for matters of little consequence. Sometimes we even shame ourselves for aspects of ourselves that we could justly feel proud of.

DECLARING WAR ON THE INNER CRITICAL PARENT

*I thought my fire was out,
and stirred the ashes . . .
I burnt my fingers.*

– Antonio Machado

The self-perpetuating habit of painfully repeating parental shamings does not have to go unchallenged. Blame can readily be transformed into the healing, heartfelt desire to fight off shame. Blame can be used to forge a loving and supportive relationship with the self.

Our blame helps us to discriminate between internal processes that are innate and life-affirming, and those that are learned, alien, and self-destructive. Effective blame restores our instinctive drive to renounce the virulent messages we were brainwashed with when we were too young to protect ourselves. The healthy anger of our blame can exorcise the ghosts of dad’s disapproving scowls and the reverberations of mom’s shaming criticisms.

In order to mobilize blame in our defense, we must first learn to recognize the critic’s internal attacks. This is sometimes as challenging as guerrilla warfare, for the inner critic often blends undetected into normal awareness. Hateful harping against the self can become so incessant that we do not even hear it. The nagging voice of the critic frequently drones on even when it has faded out of awareness, just as the pounding of the surf and the din of the freeway blend into the background when we are constantly exposed to them.

“Tuning in(ward) and turning up the volume,” as I once heard someone describe it, is a process of bringing the critic into earshot. We can tune in and turn up the volume by carefully listening to our self-talk and fully focusing on our inner experience whenever we feel toxic shame.

Most of the students in my reparenting classes are shocked when they first discover the

viciousness of their critic's voice. At the end of the turning-up-the-volume meditation that I use to highlight internal reactions to innocuous mistakes, many are astounded by how merciless they respond to themselves. Those who practice this exercise during the subsequent week report great dismay about how much their critic's voice dominates and spoils their moment-to-moment experience.

When I first began turning up the volume and tuning into the content of my mind's inner chatter, I also experienced great consternation. I heard endless variations of these angry condemnations: "Let's see how you can screw this up, dumbo!?" "Who cares what you think, stupid?" "Nice going, klutz!" "Why don't you see what else you can do to embarrass yourself?" "Can't you ever get anything right?" "Why don't you just shut up and get it that nobody gives a damn about you or your ridiculous opinions!"

The toxic shame that accompanied these messages was viscerally painful. I experienced it as an intensely anxious but curiously dead feeling in my abdomen. At times it felt as if the pandemonium of a crowded mall, the tiredness of the night shift, and the emptiness of a nursing home had formed some awful emotional amalgam deep inside me. This shame not only robbed me of my words, but also took away my will to get them back. When toxic shame was upon me, anything and everything I thought to say sounded like the worst drivel imaginable. How could I dare contribute when even I found all my thoughts eminently deserving of ridicule and censure?

Over time, the critical parent enlists the creative imagination in the service of toxic shame and invents new degrading epithets. My critic enforced the muteness my parents shamed me into and then further demeaned me for my diffidence. When I was at a loss for words I would often spiral further down into toxic shame as my critic prickled me with a host of insults: "Social cripple, hopeless introvert, boring dullard, full-time loser, zombie incommunicado."

Tuning in and observing my inner critic led me to understand why I had needed to censor myself so unmercifully. As a child, my only choice was to "identify with the aggressors" and join the winning side in the war against my self-expression. Silence allowed me to be a less noticeable target for my parents' random attacks. By not opening my mouth I refrained from giving them more ammunition (namely, my words and ideas) to use for further humiliation. Moreover, by berating myself, I beat them to the punch and softened the impact of their verbal blows. I eventually became so habituated to this process that it didn't matter whether they were present or not.

BLAMING SHAME

In many ways, toxic shame is blame turned against the self. Once we realize we are under a toxic shame attack from the critic, we can use blame to bring it to a halt. We can do this by blaming the critic and blaming shame. I first learned how to do this one graceful day while meditating. At that momentous point in time a spontaneous voice that seemed to come from my heart responded to an attack of the critic:

Wait a minute! Who's in charge here? I am! I get to decide which of these thoughts are worth identifying with. I know I have been so indoctrinated by my parents' shaming ideas and opinions of me that I

have memorized them. I cannot help that I sometimes reflexively repeat these humiliating criticisms. But their mere appearance does not mean they are true or even deserve consideration. FROM NOW ON I GET TO DECIDE WHICH THOUGHTS AND IDEAS ABOUT MYSELF ARE WORTH HONORING! I reject and renounce unfair shamings and criticisms! And if I can't completely turn them off, I will at least balance them with affirmations and validations of myself. I am hereby permanently on my side, dedicated to becoming more loving and supportive of myself.

It is natural and empowering to become indignant about having your mind poisoned against you. You can refuse to repeat the humiliating diatribes that pair with shame, and while you may not be able to instantly erase unwelcome thoughts, you can choose to override and eventually supplant them with more beneficial ones. Whenever you hear the critic's shaming messages or see internal images of your parents frowning at you, you can say something like:

How dare you talk to me (or my child) like that! You are the ones who need to shut up. You wipe that look off your face. You are exploiting the commandment to honor thy mother and father! Take your poisonous messages and toxic tapes and get the hell out of here! Don't you dare talk to me in that way or tone of voice again. Take your anger and pain back to your own mother and father and blame them for dumping it on you. Don't take it out on me anymore! Treat me with respect, or leave me alone.

Many times, some version of this self-protective process has rescued me from tumbling into the dark, silent pit of shame. I mourn for the countless times in adulthood when I needlessly fell back into that awful life-hating place because I had not yet learned how to fight the fall with healthy blame.

Blame not only builds the psychic muscles of self-protection, but it also shrinks the critic. (One of my clients liked to call me his shrink for this very reason.) When we learn to automatically switch from shame to blame, we begin to break the habit of shame. By balking at the critic's siren-like call into toxic shame and by refusing to incessantly repeat shaming messages to ourselves, we diminish the critic's strength through lack of exercise.

Disempowering the critic requires tremendous patience. Blaming the critical parent typically only brings liberation from shame in a gradual three-steps-forward, two-steps-back manner. Years of running from inner pain makes it difficult to even recognize when we are under attack. And as Bradshaw points out: there are many different faces (disguises) of shame.

One of my most common interventions with clients who understand the nature of toxic shame is to help them realize when they are stuck in it. At such times I will typically say something like: "I wonder if you're feeling so bad about yourself because of a toxic shame attack?" Sometimes the mere naming of shame helps them disengage from it. Those with significant recovery are usually immediately incensed that the past is once again biting them like

this. They also commonly report that they feel dumbfounded: “Oh my God of course, it’s toxic shame! How many times is it going to sneak up on me without me realizing it?” I usually reply: “If you’re anything like me, probably hundreds of times.”

Blame is not the only tool for dealing with the critical parent and toxic shame. Other useful tools are explored in [Chapter 9. *Embracing Your Inner Critic*](#) by Hal and Sidra Stone is also a powerful tool, outlining various techniques of “dialoguing” with the critic to diminish its destructiveness.

While there is powerful healing to be gained from an in-depth exploration of the critic’s messages, I recommend that survivors wait until they have gained some ability to detach from the critic before they spend too much time attending to the content of its messages. Those who have not learned to use anger to separate from the critic are easily reentranced by the obsessive, drasticizing face of shame.

On the other hand it is important to begin exploring and experiencing the critic once some success is achieved in disidentifying from it. This is especially true of the toxic shame aspect of the critic which has an emotional content that sometimes needs to be fully felt. There is often a great deal of sadness in shame, and some shame attacks are only resolved through crying. At such times, our grief is about the temporary death of our self-esteem and we mourn to bring about its rebirth.

There are also times when it behooves us to passively focus on shame and simply feel it. Sometimes there is simply no immediate escape from toxic shame. Our only recourse then is to learn to love ourselves and our inner children when we are temporarily trapped in shame. Unresisting acceptance can gradually dissolve shame. We need to be as tender with ourselves as possible at such times. Some of the most profound healing of recovery occurs when our inner children experience us as being there for them in their shame and loving them even more because of their awful suffering.

Declaring war on the critical parent and toxic shame is therefore not recommended as an all-or-none approach. If blame is the only approach to shame, there is danger of it becoming another dysfunctional form of emotional repression.

At the same time, a liberal use of blame is often therapeutic because toxic shame is not a natural emotional state for human beings. Toxic shame has a large learned, cognitive content. Since we have more choice about our thoughts than our feelings, we can challenge toxic thinking and gradually deconstruct destructive thought patterns.

It also bears emphasis that blame is usually the tool of choice in early recovery when the power of the critical parent is so overwhelming that the separation of renunciation is often our only healthy option.

Finally, just as it is healthy to temporarily suppress feelings when it is not viable to express them (e.g., deciding not to yell at an unfair boss or cry in an office meeting), it is especially healthy to fight and suppress toxic shame when it stands in the way of us acting righteously in our own behalf.

As our recovery progresses, we gradually become more sophisticated at recognizing shame and disidentifying from it. Unfortunately, some of us with longterm histories of abuse may never become completely immune to emotional flashbacks of shame. Unfair as it is, we may have to accept the fact that our parents’ shaming images and criticisms are so thoroughly imprinted in our psyches that we will never be totally free of them. Consequently, we may need to use anger and blame recurringly throughout our lives to extricate ourselves from revisitations

of the critical parent and toxic shame. Fortunately, those who readily and willingly battle any internal alien challenges to their dignity and safety discover that flashbacks become less frequent, less severe, and easier to manage over time.

THE INTERPLAY OF BLAME AND FORGIVENESS

I have fluctuated a great deal in the way I experience blame and forgiveness toward my parents. Before I began recovery, my father got all my blame and my mother got all my forgiveness (superficial and cognitive though it was). I began to move out of this black-and-white splitting and polarization when I first realized that my mother had also injured me in blameworthy ways.

Before this occurred, however, I also forgave my rage-aholic father without having any authentic feelings of forgiveness for him. The spiritual doctrine I followed at the time insisted upon forgiveness, and so I decided to forgive him. The cost of this false forgiveness, unbeknownst to me at the time, was a guileless, unconscious decision to have nothing more to do with him. Unaware that my repressed, seething blame expelled him from my life, I didn't see him or talk to him for twelve years. It was as if my brain forgave him but my heart and soul did not.

I remained emotionally estranged from my father until I specifically and extensively angered out my blame about his abuse. The highlights of this involved imaginatively confronting him in the past. In one particular instance I pictured my adult self coming into the room where he was berating and beating me as a child. Summoning up rageful indignation, I imagined myself guarding my inner child as he "talked back" to my father. I joined in and blamed him for his bullying and for taking unfair advantage of his size. I fought him off and threw him out of the room.

I allowed myself to purge intense anger and blame at my father many times with processes of this nature. Via these catharses, my inner child eventually realized that he was no longer imprisoned in the past, helpless in the face of my father's overwhelming size and strength. He became heartened and encouraged, and psychically grew into owning and fully inhabiting my adult body – the powerful body that continually displayed a willingness to confront the bullying ghost of my father.

As with my mother, blame work eventually released so much of my unexpressed rage that spontaneous feelings of compassion arose within me for my father. This compassion triggered an understanding that depersonalized his abuse in significant ways. I came to see, as I elaborate upon in [Chapter 10](#), that his rage at me was the rage he never redirected at his own violent father. When I imagined his terror and pain at being frequently beaten, my compassion blossomed into feeling forgiveness toward him – an uplifting feeling I never would have known had I remained fossilized in my old position of false forgiveness.

When I finally saw my father after all this blame work, I felt so unafraid of him that I was genuinely happy to see him. Something in him responded almost instantly to this, and in an exceedingly uncharacteristic gesture, he walked up and hugged me. This extremely affection-phobic man seemed more surprised than I at his spontaneously warm response.

Subsequent episodes of angering out the blame have helped me to feel decreasingly

fearful around my father, and over time I experience more and more compassion and genuine goodwill for him. I am still aggrieved, however, that I didn't know how to work through the unconscious resentment I held toward my mother while she was still alive. I like to imagine, and perhaps this is a remnant of my denial process, that we would have been able to become truly intimate in our relating.

I commonly imagine this after sessions of facilitating blame resolution with adult children and their parents. I often feel envious of the strong mutual loving feelings that usually emerge spontaneously when parents allow their adult children to nonabusively express their blame. (Chapter 12 contains practical guidelines for safely and interpersonally working through blame in parent/adult child relationships.)

Long periods of polarized blame are not unusual in the early years of recovery, especially when they have been preceded by decades of unquestioning false forgiveness. Long periods of blame are also typical at any stage of recovery that is marked by a major inroad into dissolving denial.

For many of us, blame about the past reappears unpredictably throughout our lives. A thorough dissolution of denial and minimization sometimes takes a lifetime. The most profound apprehensions of the full effect of childhood trauma cannot form until we are psychologically strong enough to fully remember and fully feel all our pain.

Such psychological strength often doesn't coalesce until extensive grieving has rewarded us with some relatively long periods of equanimity and self-acceptance. Once this occurs, we are usually then ready (although it rarely feels that way at the time) to allow ourselves to experience a more thorough sense of the impact and significance of our childhood trauma. At such times, forgiving feelings naturally lose their substance, and survivors commonly split off from loving feelings and become entrenched in anger and blame for much longer than they have had to for quite some time.

The acceptance and expression of newly emerging blame is usually the most direct path back to forgiveness. I have seen this demonstrated over and over in my work with clients. I have also observed a similar manifestation of this dynamic in pre-school children. Most of the very young children I work with (girls as well as boys) need little encouragement to physically anger out their blame at the soft dummy I use for anger work. When they finish pummeling it, most of them then transform the dummy into a cuddling toy – whether it represents an abstract “bad guy” or the real person they were angry at.

As the self-blame of shame is eroded, we naturally move into feelings of self-forgiveness, an essential preliminary for broader feelings of forgiveness. If these feelings are to expand to include our parents, we must acquire a detailed recollection of what we are forgiving them for – a specific understanding of the major themes of our childhood abuse and neglect. Without this we remain locked in the pain and resentment of being developmentally arrested in many aspects of our being. The hurt of not recovering adequate self-esteem and self-expression blocks our access to the part of ourselves that can genuinely feel forgiving. Therefore, the following chapter is designed to further dissolve denial and minimization, so that all significant childhood wounds are clearly identified before we get distracted with considerations of forgiving our parents.

FULLY FEELING DEPENDS UPON FULLY REMEMBERING

*We would rather be ruined
than changed
We would rather die
in our dread than climb
the cross of the moment
and see our illusions die.*

– W. H. Auden

Prior to beginning recovery most survivors of seriously dysfunctional families remember little of what happened to them before the age of five. Some don't remember anything before twelve. The length of the period of childhood amnesia generally correlates with the degree and extent of early traumatization. This chapter describes the importance of retrieving more accurate information about childhood so that we can thoroughly understand exactly what it is we need to recover from and what actions are required to enable that recovery. Dennis Wholey in *Becoming Your Own Parent* identifies some of the key problems that adult children need to recover from:

Equally devastating as a result of this kind of childhood is a personality profile that encompasses . . . horribly low self-esteem, the inability to have fun, being super-responsible or super-irresponsible, and becoming a dependent personality terrified of abandonment. The tragic consequence of tens of millions of adult children from unhappy homes is that they don't know who they are . . . don't know how to take care of their own needs and feel good about themselves, and don't enjoy intimacy. These millions get involved in disastrous relationships, act impulsively, judge themselves without mercy, and constantly seek approval and security.

CONSTRUCTING A DETAILED PICTURE OF CHILDHOOD ABUSE AND NEGLECT

It is in the vague feeling of being “homesick even when we are at home” that we begin to search for answers in the dark caves of infancy.

– Susanne Short

It is always a touching experience to go with a patient back far enough in the retelling of her own tale to approach that point at which she can once more see herself as too young to be reproached . . . even the most self-despicating adult cannot maintain the absurd image that she was once inadequate at being a baby.

– Sheldon Kopp

In our culture the Judeo-Christian commandment, “Honor thy father and mother” could be more accurately rendered as Alice Miller’s book title: *Thou Shalt Not Be Aware*. The blind obedience demanded of us by our parents in childhood left many of us ignorant of the effects of the verbal, spiritual, emotional, and physical abuse and neglect we suffered. (I suggest that you now review [Appendix A](#). This appendix outlines the primary forms of abuse and neglect and contrasts them with the verbal, spiritual, emotional, and physical nurturance that functional parents give to their children.)

Many of us have great difficulty dismantling our denial and minimization about our childhood suffering because the most impactful aspects of it occurred during our amnesiac pre-school years. Many of us enter recovery with little memory or sense of how we were actually parented during this time. Most survivors have huge memory gaps before the age of six. As recovery progresses many discover that they received little or no attention from their parents during this time, and that what attention they did receive was often marred by impatience and irritability.

Most toddlers in our culture are routinely subjected to intense periods of scolding and spanking. They are hampered in their development by enormous amounts of unnecessary restriction and discipline. Many parents are oblivious to the fact that children need a great deal of permission to explore their immediate environments. It is crucial to their development that they be allowed to participate as much as possible in all that transpires around them.

Functional parents liberally and patiently greet their children’s eagerness to participate and help regardless of the fact that this usually makes tasks take longer. Functional parents also “child-proof” their homes during the toddler stage (by moving all dangerous and breakable items out of reach) instead of systematically punishing and extinguishing their children’s healthy curiosity and adventurousness.

It is an awful state of affairs that so many mothers in our culture routinely arouse sympathy with the exasperated complaint “He’s into everything!” when they should instead be proudly exulting in their child’s wonderful sense of exploration. Mothers retard their children’s development and damage and destroy their spiritedness and confidence when they curtail their exuberance and confine them with unnecessary restraints. The practice of confining toddlers in

playpens for long periods is a sad Western custom that marks for most children the beginning of an ongoing, destructive confinement of their self-expression.

Functional parents give their children as much room to investigate their environment as possible, as this supports the growth of intelligence and confidence. Parents who nurture their children in this way turn the “terrible twos” into the “terrific twos.” Their children are not forced to spend excessive amounts of time rightfully “tantruming” against unfair and harmful restriction and containment. The parents themselves are also rewarded by having their own capacity for finding fascination in the mundane restimulated by their children.

Unfortunately, few parents in our culture are relaxed enough to allow and encourage their toddlers’ huge appetite for interaction and exploration. Instead many parents routinely shame and punish their children’s exuberant hunger for mastering their environments.

Impatient mothering usually costs children a great deal more than impatient fathering because children typically spend so much more time with their mothers during the enormously formative pre-school years. The lack of memory of these times supports the gross, widespread denial about our mothers’ roles in the traumatization of our self-esteem and confidence. Many survivors are restimulated to remember these times when they observe other mothers smothering their children’s expressiveness in public places like malls and supermarkets. (I’d like to make it clear that in saying this I am not trying to minimize the traumatic effects of absent fathering.)

I witness many survivors having an especially difficult time validating their losses around the nonphysical forms of abuse and neglect. Therefore, this chapter presents an in-depth exploration of the nature of verbal, spiritual, and emotional abuse and neglect.

At the same time, it is also important to note that many survivors minimize the consequences of the physical abuse they suffered. You might test yourself for this right now by closing your eyes and imagining that an enraged person, three times your size, has just entered the room glaring at you. Suddenly she yanks you up by the arm and holding you suspended in the air smacks you on the buttocks with all of her force.

If that really happened to you, can you imagine the terror you must have felt? And yet, this is not an unusual scene. Many parents, with an even greater size differential, routinely strike toddlers, often repeatedly, in this manner.

It does not seem to be necessary to recall every single incident of abuse to achieve significant recovery. On the other hand, it is essential that we identify the key themes of our abuse and neglect. Some examples of these themes are criticism of physical appearance, sarcasm about crying, belittlement about expressing anger, degradation for making mistakes, humiliation about aspirations and dreams, deprivation of affection, general lack of interest, failure to teach basic survival skills, poor care in matters of grooming and diet, lack of protection from others’ unfair criticism, and so forth.

Many of these themes can be summed up as the “no self-esteem” rule. While many dysfunctional families enforce denial and minimization through the infamous “no talk” rule, even more operate with the unspoken rule that children are not allowed to have self-esteem.

Without a detailed memory or sense of our abuse and neglect history, we remain developmentally arrested in important areas of our needs and rights. Unless we identify and reclaim these needs and rights, we will not mature into fully feeling and fully expressive adult human beings. Let us look now at the many ways in which self-esteem is destroyed by abusive or neglectful parenting.

VERBAL ABUSE

Sticks and stones will break my bones, and names will break my heart.

– Contemporary song

Verbal abuse is the use of language to shame, scare or hurt another. Dysfunctional parents routinely use name-calling, sarcasm, and destructive criticism to overpower and control their children. Verbal abuse is as commonplace in the American family as homework and table manners. It is modeled as socially acceptable in almost every sitcom on television.

The following timeworn castigations may sound familiarly painful to you: “How did I wind up with such a crummy kid?” “No one likes you, you good-for-nothing little brat.” “Only a selfish little ingrate would do that!” “Having you was the worst thing that ever happened to me!” “I can’t stand the sight of you!” “You’ll never amount to anything!” “You make me sick!” “You’re rotten through and through!” When this kind of undercutting talk is habitual, it alone will destroy a child’s self-esteem.

When language carries threats, it is even more abusive and destructive. The following admonishments are also common parlance in many dysfunctional families: “If you don’t do what I say, I will never talk to you again.” “If you don’t wipe that expression off your face, I’ll wipe it off for you.” “If you don’t eat your peas, you’ll get nothing for Christmas.” (I had one unfortunate client who, for the crime of forgetting to make her bed one day, was only given a piece of coal on her fifth Christmas!) When children are addressed frequently in such ways, they are forced to live in fear as well as toxic shame.

Verbal abuse is quite different from constructive criticism. Statements like “Hitting your sister is not okay,” “I don’t like it when you call me names,” and “If you don’t do your homework, you cannot go out to play” are not verbal abuse. Parents owe it to their children to correct behaviors that are harmful to them or others. This duty can readily be accomplished in ways that are not abusive or shaming, and that point out that the behavior is bad, not the child.

Unfortunately, many survivors grew up in families in which criticism was not constructive. Not only was criticism destructive, but it was often inaccurate and presented as if it were scientific fact. Many survivors still believe and cling to negative parental appraisals regardless of how much objective evidence there is to the contrary. I frequently hear very intelligent, accomplished survivors inaccurately disparaging themselves with their parents’ brandings of “stupid” and “worthless.”

EMOTIONAL ABUSE

We understand and accept that victims of physical or sexual abuse need time and specialized treatment to heal. But when it comes to emotional abuse, we are more likely to believe victims will “just get over it” when they become adults. This assumption is dangerously wrong. Emotional abuse scars the heart and damages the soul. Like

cancer, it does its most deadly work internally. And, like cancer, it can metastasize if untreated.

– Andrew Vachss

Emotional abuse is the use of feelings to shame, scare, or hurt another. The parent who screams and yells with rage at her child is being emotionally abusive. She is dumping her anger and frustration on the child.

When children are continuously sullied with their parents' anger, sadness, depression, and fear, they get a "bad taste" for these emotions. This adds to their fear of these feelings in themselves and in others. They grow up to be adults who go to extraordinary lengths to avoid feeling or expressing emotions.

The parent who manipulates by withdrawing from his child in pouting, angry silence also commits emotional abuse. He is emotionally blackmailing his child through abandonment and through evoking guilt and fear to gain more absolute control over her.

Emotional incest is yet another form of emotional abuse. Emotional incest commonly involves the reversal of the parent/child roles. When this occurs, the mother or father "parentifies" the child who is then manipulated to gratify the unmet childhood needs of the parent. This typically manifests as the parent pumping the child for the unconditional love that she should herself be giving. Patricia Love has written a very helpful book on this subject called *The Emotional Incest Syndrome*.

Emotional incest also occurs when a parent transforms his child into a confidant and uses her as a sounding board for all his concerns and problems. Alice Miller explains how easy it is for parents to seduce a child into this kind of relationship:

A newborn baby is completely dependent on his parents, and since their caring is essential for his existence, he does all he can to avoid losing them. From the very first day onward, he will muster all his resources to this end, like a small plant that turns toward the sun in order to survive.

THE DEADLY DUO OF VERBAL AND EMOTIONAL ABUSE

Creativity is so delicate a flower that praise tends to make it bloom, while discouragement often nips it in the bud.

– Alex Osborn

Verbal and emotional abuse are often perpetrated at one and the same time. Unfair angry criticism is an example of this, as the criticism is not only destructive in meaning but also charged with hurtful emotion. Anger and disgust in a parent's tone of voice makes the child feel that he is essentially bad and unlovable.

Tone of voice is often the vehicle by which emotions are delivered. Tone of voice alone

can be very abusive. “Of course we love you” can be uttered in an emotionally venomous way, even though the words themselves are not abusive. Some martyrish mothers could intone “I only want you to be happy” in a way that would make a saint or a sociopath feel guilty.

The use of tone of voice to emotionally intimidate is usually the exclusive right of the parents. What adult child does not remember being scolded with the retort “How dare you talk to me in THAT tone of voice”? Yet who among us was ever allowed to protest that same tone in our parents’ voices?

Destructive words paired with the emotions of anger or disgust force children to contract in fear and toxic shame. When this happens on a daily basis, children suffer so intensely that they may be driven into early drug and alcohol abuse, mental illness, or even suicide – even in families that are not physically abusive. This is important to note because so many survivors recoil at sympathy for the verbal and emotional abuse they suffered. They often do this by citing the classic minimization: “I had it good compared to others. They never even hit me!”

Dysfunctional parents often add emotional abuse to verbal abuse by delivering destructive messages with intimidating body language and facial expressions of hate or disgust. It is abusive to scowl at a child with loathing affect, with skin inflamed with rage, and with facial veins bulging in hate. It is abusive to deliver a critical message with clenched fists or with hands pounding on the table. When an adult does this to a child, the child becomes terrified. If he is young enough, this fear may so overwhelm him that he wets his pants like a terrorized puppy.

When parents scowl at children as if they are disgusting, they often internalize this as a sense of being ugly, no matter how physical attractive they actually are. In moments of deep vulnerability in therapy, I have heard models, actors, and others whom most people would consider beautiful or handsome express great disgust and disappointment in their looks.

In my early years as a therapist, this incongruity so perplexed me that I had a hard time taking it seriously. As my denial and minimization about verbal and emotional abuse subsided, I could see more clearly how survivors’ self-images become so distorted. When a child is bombarded with critical messages accompanied by a tone of disgust and a facial expression of loathing, she cannot help but believe that she is ugly and unpleasant to look at. When this happens constantly during her formative years – during the years when she is forming her self-image – she is forced to visualize herself as ugly, no matter how beautiful she appears to others. Her self-image becomes so distorted that she can only see ugliness when she looks in the mirror.

The combination of verbal and emotional abuse is the most lethal weapon used in the destruction of children’s self-esteem. When children are continuously assaulted in this way, they eventually become numb and get used to being degraded. When this occurs, denial “concretizes” and children sever the connection with their normal feelings of hurt and anger about verbal hostility. With no access to the healthy blame that normally arises to challenge such attacks, they may unprotestingly put up with verbal and emotional abuse for the rest of their lives. If they are female, they may even join the ranks of the many women in our culture who brag that they have good marriages because their husbands never hit them!

Survivors need to regain their feelings about how much it hurts to be lambasted in critical ways and in belligerent tones. If they do not, they risk becoming permanent dumping grounds for other people’s anger. I am often struck by the number of people around me who allow significant others to routinely hurt them with an abusive tone of voice or with denigrating remarks. Even when I see them contract and become small and quiet on such occasions, they usually deny my observation that it seems to really hurt them. I have finally come to realize that they truly believe

that it does not, as decades of work in this field have shown me that denial is an incomparable filter for screening out painful input that is or seems to be uncontestable.

SARCASM AND TEASING: DISGUISED ABUSE

Studies of teasing behavior in children . . . powerfully traumatic to the young victim of the behavior, suggest that it is significantly more prevalent among children from homes where discipline is severe and authoritarian, contrasted to homes with a tolerance for the open, direct expression of anger and assertiveness.

– Bach and Goldman

Sarcasm and teasing are among the most widespread forms of verbal and emotional abuse in our society today. Many of us routinely and unconsciously use destructive sarcasm – usually under the cover of innocent fun – to dump anger and shame on each other. Sarcasm can be used to do this through blatant insults and put-downs or through the more subtle form of teasing.

This is not to say that sarcasm and teasing are all-or-none issues. Most people can enjoy mild, nontoxic forms of teasing. Noncharged and nondestructive sarcasm can be truly funny. When an individual has recovered access to all of his emotions, he can often use humor to release discomfort or hurt in a healthy way. The laughter that accompanies nonabusive teasing can sometimes discharge pain in a way that cannot be matched by crying or angering.

Laughter, however, is dysfunctional when it is used to mask, rather than release, sadness or anger. For just as crying cannot replace the function of angering in grieving, laughter cannot replace the function of either crying or angering. Unfortunately, emotional expressiveness has become so distorted in our culture that we often laugh when we really need to cry, and commonly use sarcastic humor to express anger rather than be directly assertive.

When we easily express our sadness and anger about hurt, we can also release some of it through humor. Joking and laughing about life's pains and losses is normal, healthy, and often wonderful. Fully feeling people enjoy a rich, fluid balance of crying, angering, and laughing in the release of pain and hurt. Most survivors can benefit from gentle teasing about their life difficulties if they are also welcomed to be mad and sad about them.

CHARACTERISTICS OF DESTRUCTIVE SARCASM

Denial is rampant about the destructiveness of sarcasm in this culture. Much of the teasing and sarcasm that takes place in the average family and wider society is little more than camouflaged abuse.

In the guise of humor, many of us say horribly insulting things to each other. We commonly wound each other with sarcasm even when we are honestly and innocently intending only to be funny. Sarcasm is abusive, however, whether it is blatantly or unconsciously insulting.

Distinguishing healthy teasing from damaging sarcasm is sometimes difficult. The key

characteristic of destructive sarcasm is that it is belittling and damaging to another's self-esteem. An important bottom line here is that sarcasm is destructive when the teased individual feels hurt and does not feel "tickled" in any way.

Unfortunately, some of us are so emotionally deadened that we don't recognize sarcastic attacks. Sometimes we even fail to notice how contracted and wary we become around those who habitually prick us with sarcasm. Because of this, we must learn to identify other characteristics of destructive sarcasm and teasing.

Hurtful sarcasm is often delivered in an aggressive, humiliating, or condescending tone of voice. Such intonation typically affects us in noticeable ways. We often instinctively contract and shrink in response to the noxiousness of teasing attention. We often hold our breath, squirm or flush in embarrassment, and feel the urge to run away or disappear.

It feels awful to be on the receiving end of abusive sarcasm. Imagine being the target of a nasty comedian like Don Rickles or someone who has actually hurtfully teased you. How do you feel inside as you picture them picking on you in front of other people?

Destructive sarcasm is also characterized by its subject matter. It often aims mocking attention at our vulnerabilities, idiosyncrasies, and misfortunes. Almost all of us have been teased unmercifully about our most tender vulnerabilities. Because of this, many of us are reluctant to share our sore spots with anyone but our most trusted friends.

Some of us have been so betrayed by malicious teasing that we don't share our insecurities with anyone at all. Instead, we accumulate large burdens of minor fears, humiliations, and failings that we could easily discard if we could talk about them without being ridiculed. No wonder feelings of loneliness and disconnection are so prevalent in our culture.

I am frequently struck with sadness as I witness various clients writhe in discomfort as they squeeze out "confessions" of their own "imperfections." Perhaps ninety-five percent of the deepest, darkest secrets my clients struggle to reveal are the relatively innocent taboo thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of all healthy human beings. Great burdens of shame and fear accrue around such harmless universal experiences as revenge fantasies, death fears, angry perseverations, sexual reveries, and grandiose flights of fancy. And guilt about minor and relatively harmless mistakes or lapses into unfairness is almost always grossly out of proportion to their actual severity. This is yet another horrible consequence of being deprived in childhood of a safe place to normalize our foibles through empathic sharing.

In our culture, our uniqueness is often subjected to sarcasm in such a way that we often feel too afraid and ashamed to unfold into the full intricacy of our individuality. To avoid teasing, many of us avoid expressing ourselves in ways that make us stand out or excel. We are afraid to be more than anyone else in most areas of our lives. We embrace mediocrity and the sterility of conformity, and silence ourselves or withdraw when we can't come up with the ordinary and expected response to a given situation. Our authenticity withers and dies, and is replaced by a soulless rhetoric of trivia, cliches, and all that has been proven to be safe and socially acceptable. For women, this is the curse of pinkness and lace. For men, this is banishment into the desert of box scores and statistics – the impoverished monoculture of sports conversation.

Sarcasm has ravaged conversation so severely in our culture that "culture" is almost a misnomer for a society which displays such pervasive poverty in its expressiveness. The emptiness of the cocktail patter that characterizes most of our social gatherings stems directly from the fact that there is so little that is safe to talk about.

Sarcasm has become so socially acceptable that noted individuals are sometimes “honored” in sickening orgies of sarcasm called “roasts.” If beings from another planet witnessed one of these roasts, they would probably think that the “honoree” was being punished for a terrible crime. How awful that the pillars of our society model to us that insults disguised as jokes are not only acceptable, but also worthy of smiling appreciation.

It is also widely considered “fair game” in our society to aim sarcasm at people’s distinguishing physical characteristics. I was so frequently teased about being freckled in childhood that I came to hate my skin. Many people with red hair come to feel the same kind of shame because of relentless childhood teasing. And what rare person has not been teased into disliking his or her body? Who has not tumbled into self-hatred because of teasing comparisons to someone taller or shorter, thinner or heavier, darker or fairer? How many men fail to enjoy sex because they don’t have a penis the size of a stallion’s? How many women suffer similarly because they do not weigh ten or twenty pounds less than what is actually healthy for them?

Sarcasm also causes many of us to lose our ability to talk about our successes as well as our failures and losses. Accomplishments and healthy pride in one’s achievements are often degraded in the family. Ambitions and aspirations are commonly ridiculed as if they were preposterous. Many of us have had our healthy self-validation violated with sardonic criticisms: “Don’t make me laugh!” “Listen to Mr. Know-it-all!” “You and what army?” “You’ll be lucky to get a job as a ditchdigger.” “Who are you kidding, the only thing you’ll ever earn is an award for being lazy and good-for-nothing!”

In this same vein, I sometimes wonder how many males are mocked out of a natural leaning toward the arts and helping professions, and how many females are taunted out of their natural leadership and athletic abilities.

Finally, destructive sarcasm reinforces perfectionism. We are so terrified of the teasing that will “greet” our mistakes that we take few if any risks in our lives. Hence, many of us give up trying to learn new things and completely lose our wonderful sense of curiosity and adventure very early in life.

SARCASM WOUNDS

*How easy the breath that kills a flame
How hard to kindle that light again.
Cold words kill and kind words kindle
By words withheld a dream may dwindle.*

– Joan Walsh Anglund

Whether or not we are aware of it, we still register hurt at the core of our being when we are unfairly teased. I see this over and over in my private practice when clients finally remember and relive the pain of being traumatically teased in childhood. Such recollections often precipitate deep grieving releases of the hurt they were too humiliated to express at the time.

I once witnessed a particularly dismaying example of this in a rugged, hardened old man who was remembering being cruelly teased by two older boys in childhood. He cried silently for a long time as he recalled the pain of their taunting and the decision he made at that time to

forevermore harden himself with a facade of toughness. He was profoundly aggrieved as he realized the tremendous sacrifice of closeness and affection that this had cost him.

If only he had had a parent trustworthy enough to go to for comfort when he was first wounded by this teasing. If only he had had a parent caring and wise enough to reassure him that it was the older boys who should be ashamed and not he. If only he been able to cry out his pain instead of walling it off and entombing himself in the loneliness of his “tough guy” defense.

As I write this I feel fortunate that I have “only” had to live half my life in a macho defense. I hope I will always have a tender place of self-compassion for the stark loneliness that, like the aforementioned man, marred my early life with so much unnecessary isolation and gloom.

As I reminisce further about those times, I recall the first time I was beaten up outside my family in childhood. I had wandered into the wrong neighborhood and was beaten so badly that I was bleeding from both the outside and inside of my nose. The physical pain of this was minor, however, compared to the shame I felt. I knew that if anyone saw or heard about my thrashing I would be mocked about it forever. I slunk home, told no one about it, and hid in my room as much as possible for weeks. I told my parents and others who noticed my cut, swollen nose that I had fallen off my bike. That in itself was gravely humiliating; it brought its own tirade of put-downs and insults about my clumsiness and stupidity.

Boys in this culture are often cruelly ridiculed for showing any kind of reaction to pain at all. Ridicule is often as intense for demonstrations of physical pain as it is for emotional pain. I can remember another time, around age six, when I fell and hurt myself in a game. I got up and, on the verge of tears, was encircled by a ring of ominous-looking older boys. “Look, the little pansy’s about to cry,” scoffed one of them. I tried to hold back my tears with all my might. I was almost successful, but then one boy noticed my upper lip quivering slightly: “Look, his lip’s shaking – he’s going to crryyy!” To their glee, I did cry. They had fun teasing me about that for what seemed like an eternity. I didn’t cry again for many, many years.

Scorn about pain has become so acceptable in this culture that sadistic television videos, replete with highlights of athletes painfully colliding with inanimate objects or each other, pass for entertainment. Canned laughter often accompanies the moments of impact and injury, further encouraging the audience to laugh at someone else’s expense.

Such practices increase our fear of being ridiculed and cause most of us to go to extraordinary lengths to hide our hurts. If we become especially effective at disguising our pain, we can even hide our hurts from ourselves. Some professional athletes become so inured to pain that they continue to compete even with a broken bone. If human beings can learn to deny physical pain of that magnitude, how much easier is it to numb out emotional pain?

When children grow up with parents who use sarcasm to punish and control them, they learn that hurling hurtful insults is normal and acceptable behavior. Eventually, they cease to register sarcasm as “painful” to themselves or others.

There is a time before this happens, however, when children are still emotionally whole enough to feel the stinging hurtfulness of destructive teasing. For a brief period, their natural instincts lead them to strongly protest unfair teasing. Most toddlers fight vehemently against teasing as if it were the most abominable thing in their lives.

Unfortunately, children’s angry objections to hurtful teasing are easily squelched by their all-powerful parents and typically become more fodder for the relentless sarcasm that eventually vanquishes them. When children cry about being teased, they give their parents even more

“ammunition” with which to attack and degrade them. This is especially true for boys. Their tears often earn them the brand of sissy or crybaby.

Most children have their normal reactions against sarcasm extinguished early in life. This destruction occurs quite rapidly when children have older siblings who also “poke fun” at them and their as-yet unhidden vulnerabilities. Even children who come from sarcasm-free families are typically teased out of any sensitivity to destructive teasing by peers who mimic their sarcastic parents, siblings, and television heroes. Sooner or later most of us grow up to accept the judgment that we are being overserious, oversensitive or humorless whenever we have any defensive reaction to teasing.

Emotional expression may be society’s favorite target for sarcasm. Just as boys are commonly teased out of their tears, girls are customarily teased out of their anger and exhorted to be “nice.” Both genders are expected to have all of their emotions totally in control before they are even ready for school.

And woe on the adult who loses emotional control, for widespread mockery is often the consequence! Political experts surmised that a female gubernatorial candidate recently lost an election because she cried in public. It did not matter that her tears were especially appropriate for the occasion. Newscasters reveled in a feast of sarcasm about her “weakness,” parodying various situations in which the most minor political frustrations would reduce her to tears.

SARCASM: THE LEAKING OUT OF REPRESSED ANGER

A child who teases is expressing indirect hostility. The teasing is a manifestation of his inability to express aggression in open and direct ways. The teasing child is not reacting to real and immediate annoyances. He is scapegoating and expressing ill will that has been carried over as a result of past suppression of the direct expression of these feelings.

– Bach and Goldberg

We are offered virtually no guidance in our society about how to use communication to effectively work through our conflicts. We are not even taught that it is normal to have differences and disappointments with our friends and lovers. Conventional wisdom says that if we really like and love our friends and intimates, we will never have difficulties with them. This unrealistic expectation makes us repress the anger of our normal pains and strains with each other.

Repressed anger about our relationship disappointments, however, does not mysteriously disappear or work itself out. It always creates a pressure in the unconscious that seeks release. This release often occurs when our unexpressed criticisms unconsciously leak out into our speech and cause us to say cutting things to each other in the name of humor. At such times, our repressed frustration can charge our laughter with angry derision and our tone of voice with shame. Even a whispered “dig” can carry emotional venom.

Sarcasm commonly substitutes for assertiveness in many everyday situations. Instead of confronting an issue of lateness directly, we might ridicule our friend with labels like “flake” or

“space cadet.” Instead of directly confronting flirtatiousness or talking about our own jealousy, we might make nasty jokes about our partner’s appearance. Instead of asking for better listening, we might tease the other about being senile or scatterbrained. Instead of saying no to the request to do something we do not want to do, we might call the proposed activity “clever for someone with a low I.Q.” Instead of admitting we do not know something, we might reply “What kind of idiot would ask a question like that?” or “What do I look like – an encyclopedia?”

If we remain unconscious about the hurtfulness of our teasing, we may become habituated to using sarcastic humor to disguise and release our aggression. If our victim squirms in discomfort or protests our abrasiveness, we may then justify ourselves with condescending disclaimers: “What’s the matter with you? Can’t you see I was just kidding?” “Don’t you have a sense of humor?” “You always take everything so seriously.” “Can’t you take a joke?” Destructive sarcasm habitually adds insult to injury.

I believe we all at heart crave the safety of not being made a laughingstock. Unless we recognize unfair teasing and sarcasm for the verbal and emotional abuse that it is, we may continue to allow others to bait and ridicule us.

We may also get drawn into playing the awful game of swapping sarcastic insults. How easy it is for this game to escalate into intimacy-slaying proportions. The unbridled use of sarcasm builds walls between people that prevent intimate sharing. Relationships are forced to remain superficial because only impersonal topics are safe enough to be discussed. Forgotten and unconscious wounds never really heal as destructive teasings continually poke and prod them. The comfort of being safe and relaxed around others remains elusive.

TELEVISION AND SARCASM

For most of us, television is the *coup de grace* to our sensibilities about the harmfulness of sarcastic banter. Destructive sarcasm pollutes the dialogue of most of the American (and British) families portrayed on television. Although I can hardly bear to watch most situation comedies, I am often shocked at the viciousness of their sarcasm whenever I briefly peruse them. Friends and family members routinely gibe each other with snide, condescending remarks. The more cruel the insult, the harder the audience laughs. The more lacerating the sarcasm, the more the taunter is admired. The more vulnerable the speech or behavior of a character, the more he or she is mocked.

Venomous character assassins like Don Rickles, Howard Stern, and Andrew Dice Clay masquerade as comedians and have even become celebrities. Even David Letterman, for all his pure comic brilliance, sometimes degenerates into destructive sarcasm. He baits some interviewees so intensely that they can hardly hide their discomfort even though they are accomplished actors.

Children are especially prone to imitating what they see on television. When their media idols model the same sarcastic derision they get at home, they are thoroughly brainwashed into believing that ridicule is actually funny and acceptable. Boys are especially susceptible as many social forces over-encourage their aggressive and competitive tendencies. As television prompts them to prickle their peers with sarcastic humor, proficiency and viciousness at the put-down become goals for which most boys strive.

Because of this, most boys grow up in a war zone of mockery and sniggering. He who insults the quickest and deepest often wields the most power, and small-group leaders are often those with the nastiest tongues. Via this process, destructive sarcasm becomes embedded in the communication styles of many men. (As I glance cursorily at the latest TV sitcoms, it appears that girls and women are now being drafted to fight on the battlefield of jocular denigration.)

SARCASM MAKES MAN AN ISLAND

John Dunne, who wrote the poem *No Man Is an Island*, would probably roll over in his grave today if he saw how pervasively untrue this is of modern men. Males in our culture are routinely indoctrinated in the isolating process of sarcastic shaming as soon as they begin to walk and talk. Most boys are ridiculed unmercifully for making mistakes, for “dropping the ball,” and for responding to pain with tears. They are taunted with names like “crybaby,” “wimp,” and “sissy” whenever they falter in any way. These taunts are often hurled with such venom and disgust that most boys learn to hate their vulnerability before they even have the language skills to verbally express it.

Most boys lose touch with their emotions via being “nurtured” on sarcasm. Every emotion, except anger, is teased out of them. Over time they learn to automatically repress their other feelings, especially fear and sadness, and replace them with anger. Anger and angry sarcasm then become the only acceptable modes of male emotional expression.

Although some boys grow up to become rage-aholics, most eventually learn how to control their anger by diverting it into sarcasm. Most gradually devolve into the feelingless stereotype of the modern male who is totally befuddled by the notion of feelings.

With enough sarcastic prodding, a boy’s tolerance for others’ feelings and vulnerabilities also dies. Empathy gets buried in the graveyard of his unconscious along with the corpse of his own sense of self-compassion, without which there is rarely any real sympathy for others. Many boys grow up to be men who never know real intimacy because they alienate everyone around them with sarcastic dumping. Others are afraid to come too close to them because of the hurtfulness of their cold, prickly style of communicating.

This strands the average man on the desert island of his overprotected self, unable to give or receive emotional support. Terrified of being ridiculed if he were to admit to being troubled or in need of help, he starves for the balmy nurturing that comes from open communication about personal hurts. Master of a barren world that knows no warmth, tenderness, or comforting, he shows only his stolid face, unquivering lips, brave words, and coastline jaw. His sad or hurt feelings must be drowned in beer or hidden in some other compulsive activity, and the only time he can drop his guard is in the loneliness of the bedroom or bathroom. William Stafford writes powerfully about this in this excerpt from his poem *A Ritual To Read To Each Other*:

*If you don't know the kind of person I am
and I don't know the kind of person you are
a pattern that others made may prevail in the world
and following the wrong god home we may miss our star.*

*And so I appeal to a voice, to something shadowy,
a remote important region in all who talk:
though we could fool each other, we should consider –
lest the parade of our mutual life get lost in the dark.*

Even “nice guys” commonly wound with sarcasm. As a bona fide nice guy, officer and gentleman by Act of Congress, and secret adherent to the archetypal white knight complex, I still managed to regularly radiate my anger out through sarcasm. Because I prided myself on never hurting anyone, I insistently assured those who complained about my teasing that they were taking me too seriously. Thankfully, emotional recovery work eventually allowed me to overcome my denial and insensitivity about the hurtfulness of my “jesting.”

More than any other harm that I have caused, I deeply regret that what I dismissed as humor was an enthusiastic participation in the scapegoating and persecution of a number of individuals in my life. If any of you are reading this book, I am profoundly sorry for how I hurt you.

SARCASM KILLS RELATIONSHIPS

Relationships are decimated by sarcasm in a number of different ways. Some degenerate into deadly battlefields where partners continually volley vicious insults back and forth. Some reenact the parent/child imbalance of power in which one party ridicules the unprotesting other. And some avoid communication as much as possible because hurtful teasing has made their conversations so unpleasant.

Identifying and confronting abusive sarcasm is often a difficult and confusing task. I frequently see this in my work with couples, especially those in which one partner is doing recovery work and the other is not. When the recoveree begins to feel the hurtfulness of her partner’s sarcastic teasing, she often has great difficulty convincing him that it really hurts. The teaser will often go to great lengths to deny the noxiousness of his remarks, sometimes becoming extremely angry and defensive about requests to give up even the most blatantly hurtful sarcasm.

Inveterate perpetrators of sarcasm are usually adept at shaming those who complain about being their targets. They vehemently rebuff requests to refrain from teasing because they unconsciously know they will experience great discomfort if they are denied their primary (often only) anger-release valve.

Nonetheless, the survivor needs to challenge hurtful sarcasm no matter how much the teaser protests. She cannot afford to forsake her right to be the final authority about whether or not she has been hurt. If she tacitly accepts sarcasm, she may be bullied into believing that the hurt and shame she feels about unfair teasing is indeed evidence that there is something defective about her feelings and that she is nothing but a humorless whiner.

I have had many clients come into therapy asking me to “fix” their “terrible hypersensitivity” to sarcasm. I am often appalled by the noxiousness of the teasing that they want to learn to ignore. Some have even been to therapists who out of their own denial encouraged them to re-repress their healthy hurt feelings about such verbal abuse.

If the adult child continues to deny her inborn ability to feel the hurtfulness of this kind of

abuse, she may be victimized by sarcasm all her life. The more she validates how she really feels about painful teasing, the more empowered she will be to recognize it and confront it in both herself and others.

One wonderful reward that has come to me through emotional recovery work is that I now instinctively wince as much at my own hurtful sarcastic slips as I do at those of others. Happily these slips seem to be on the verge of extinction now that I am generally able to feel and grieve new pain before it accumulates and unconsciously forces me to release it through sarcasm.

HEALTHY LIMITS WITH SARCASM AND TEASING

When partners thoroughly discuss their concerns about their differences, they can often use gentle teasing to enjoyably release some of the tension that is inherent in these differences. Distinguishing between lighthearted and hurtful teasing, however, may still at times be problematic.

Phrases that strike one person as hurtful, might seem hilarious to another. It is therefore important that intimates allow each other the right to set their own limits about being teased. This means, at the very least, that they should be taken seriously when they report feeling hurt by any particular remark.

A four-year-old friend of mine who overheard me discussing this subject with her parents forcefully proclaimed: “Yeah Pete, sometimes teasing is funny and sometimes it’s nasty.” I believe we all need to reclaim the sensibility in ourselves that, like this little girl’s, lucidly knows whether or not something is hurting us.

Many couples benefit from making their own agreements about the limits of teasing. Certain issues may be declared off-limits for teasing, and each party may be given permission to unilaterally call for the end of teasing at any time. This is somewhat similar to tickling which can be a source of ecstasy or excruciating pain if the “tickle-ee” has had enough and can’t get the tickler to stop.

Here are two illustrations of the differences between healthy and destructive teasing. I can sometimes tease my partner about opera, which she loves and I can live without. I can occasionally tease her because I have made it very clear that I respect our differences in musical taste. If I tease her too often, however, or at a time when she is engrossed in the enjoyment of opera, I am in danger of being abusive. My teasing cannot help but sound unfair and hurtful.

Moreover, I risk being even more abusive if I tease her at a time when I really should be asking her to listen to opera less often while I am in the room. When my teasing is free of hidden agendas, however, we can occasionally both get a laugh out of my talentless baritone or soprano impersonation.

Here is the second illustration. I can usually enjoy my partner’s teasing about my untidiness. However, there are times when I cannot. One of these is when she tries to get me to match her standards of neatness in my separate areas of the house.

When her teasing is not of the controlling or dumping variety (and it rarely is), we are both amused by our differences around tidiness. Her ghost stories about my dust bunnies mutating into dust trolls can make us both laugh. This, I might add, is also possible because we participate equally in the mundane tasks of housekeeping in our shared living space.

CONSTRUCTIVE FEEDBACK NATURALLY DE-ESCALATES SARCASM

*I was angry with my friend:
I told my wrath, my wrath did end.
I was angry with my foe:
I told it not, my wrath did grow.*

– William Blake

Even the most healthy relationships have a modicum of differences and disappointments in them. If partners do not have open channels of communication, they will not be able to discuss and work through their feelings about their differences. Disappointments that are not directly expressed are rarely resolved and often become the subject of unending teasing. Continuous jibing over unresolved issues eventually turn them into wounds that fester and sap the life out of relationships.

Unfortunately, few of us receive any guidance on how to healthily communicate the natural disappointment we feel when our intimates have differing needs and expectations. As children we had years of practice silently capitulating to our parents with nary a complaint.

Most of us also unconsciously feel as though we have already had a lifetime's supply of criticism and can't possibly bear any more. We yearn for disappointment-free relationships in an all-or-none way, and in the hope of achieving perfect harmony we go to extraordinary lengths to deny even the gravest disappointments. In so doing we cannot help but expect our partners to also not complain.

Yet every time we hide a disappointment from our partner, it is as if we are placing a brick in a wall gradually arising between us. If we never open our communication to constructive feedback, this wall eventually becomes so thick that it blocks the authentic exchange of love and warmth. Via this process, relationships that were once truly loving wither and die, and honeymoon becomes "honeydoom." This is especially sad when it happens to survivors who have regained significant self-expression through their recovery efforts only to once again regress back into being the voiceless children they were around their parents.

We can protect our relationships from the angry sarcasm that commonly erupts out of such tight-lipped silence by welcoming each other's constructive criticism. Such practice also benefits us individually, as receiving a fair, objective picture about one's self from another is a priceless gift.

Dan Beaver's inspiring book, *Beyond The Marriage Fantasy*, offers practical guidelines for creating a safe forum for giving constructive feedback. His witty style of writing is especially powerful in helping men understand the need for communicating more thoroughly.

When we have made significant progress in recovery, we are receptive to fair complaints about sarcasm and destructive criticism. We willingly stop our teasing when we are made aware of its hurtfulness, and we readily stand up for ourselves and confront comments by others that feel charged or hurtful. At the same time, we also benefit from being somewhat tolerant of our friends' guileless sarcasm, as long as they honor our requests not to direct it at our sensitivities.

NEGLECT: INVISIBLE PERPETRATION

You can't know the difference between cruelty and nurturance unless you've had nurturing.

– John Bradshaw

A tree grown in a cave does not bear fruit.

– Kahlil Gibran

If our society is in gross, pervasive denial about the destructiveness of verbal and emotional abuse, how much more ignorant are we of the damage caused by verbal and emotional neglect? Maltreatments of omission are so much harder to identify than those of commission, especially when they occur together. The fact that a perpetrator lets a victim bleed after stabbing him may seem insignificant compared to the violent act itself, yet the former may be the actual cause of death. Adult children who were verbally and emotionally blasted into dissociated numbness have difficulty realizing they were also starved for praise, love, and engagement.

For many survivors it is incomprehensible that verbal and emotional neglect caused them grave losses. If certain kinds of fundamental nurturance have never been experienced, it is hard to know they were missing. Many of us are in recovery for years before we begin to understand the profound damage we suffered because of childhood deprivation. If we do not clearly recognize the exact nature of our neglect, we risk remaining oblivious to recurrences of it in our current relationships.

VERBAL NEGLECT

There is no freedom of speech for children in families afflicted by the “no-talk” rule and the belief that “children should be seen and not heard.” Modern parents routinely neglect their children by not spending generous amounts of time talking with them. *Verbal neglect* is conversational deprivation. It causes children to grow up believing there is something so fundamentally wrong with them that they are unworthy of conversational engagement.

Verbal neglect is especially painful and destructive to children when they see their parents talking enthusiastically with other children. I can still recall the acute pain I felt when my father bantered with my cousins or the neighborhood kids. He made my heart ache because he never joked around with me. His neglect further turned my mind against me, augmenting the ever-growing list of defects I imagined as the cause of his liking other children more than me.

A child needs a parent to listen with interest to what he has to say in order to develop a solid foundation of self-esteem. The child who is not consistently invited and welcomed to speak grows up to believe that he is boring, uninteresting, and worthless. If the child is not frequently and enthusiastically engaged in conversation, how will he build the confidence to risk sharing his inner world with anyone else? I have had numerous clients, with no abuse history at all, who have suffered years of depression and social isolation because of their extremely noninteractive parents. This lack of conversational engagement convinced them that nothing they could possibly think of to say would be of any interest to anyone.

Girls who grow up with fathers who do not communicate with them are at risk of

becoming women who settle for dysfunctional, “silent husband” relationships. If their mothers normalize their fathers’ detachment with clichés like “Don’t bother your father, dear, he’s had a hard day at work” and “Of course your father loves you, dear, he’s just too tired to talk to you right now,” they may marry men who are just as aloof and unapproachable as the twentieth century stereotype of “dear old dad.”

Unless survivors work through the illusion that dad’s disinterest was really love, they are unlikely to expect anything better from their partners. Oblivious to the fact that they suffered from their fathers’ lack of interest, and with no other model of opposite-sex intimacy, they are exceptionally prone to marry men with similar disabilities.

Those of us who do not understand and work through this aspect of repetition compulsion often lead dismally lonely lives. Life loses its glow when we are stranded in relationships that are as verbally and emotionally impoverished as the ones we had with our parents. When disinterest passes for love, we fail to realize that much of our depression and hunger comes from being so deprived. Ongoing lack of attention to a partner is a cruel and insidious form of neglect!

VERBAL NURTURANCE

Children require a great deal of verbal engagement to develop self-esteem and good communication skills. Parents are the pivotal players in their acquisition of verbal skills. If a child’s confidence and self-esteem are to solidify, he needs to experience his parents as readily available to hear what he has to say.

Parents who are not neglectful, willingly and enthusiastically listen to their child. They do it not only out of duty, but also out of gratitude, for exposure to a child’s naturally vibrant curiosity and thirst for understanding can be healthily infectious. Participating in the miraculously rapid unfoldment and expansion of a fully welcomed new mind is a truly inspiring experience.

Parents enhance the growth of a child’s verbal skills by eliciting her speech. *Elicitation* is the art of encouraging a child to speak fully and uninhibitedly about her experience. Elicitation allows the child’s self-expression to blossom and enhances his capacity to find the joy and love that comes so naturally out of shame-free communication.

Elicitation is enhanced by nonjudgmental listening and open-ended questioning. Questioning is helpful to the degree that it is free from hidden agendas and motivated by a sincere desire to understand. Nurturing questions make it easy for the child to share. They are typically easy to answer and do not feel intrusive or manipulative to the child.

A child also needs copious amounts of praise, encouragement, and positive feedback for the verbal, emotional, and physical ways that she expresses herself. Her ability to talk, sing, dance, draw, play, perform, work, create, and problem-solve needs appreciation if it is to grow and mature.

Verbal encouragement bolsters a child’s willingness to take the risks that are necessary for ongoing growth and development. Every child is born with natural self-confidence, but this confidence will not survive and grow without the fertilization and care provided by positive verbal feedback.

Instruction and guidance are also integral parts of good parenting. Parents have especially

important roles as guides and teachers in the years before formal schooling, and failure in this regard is also verbal neglect.

At the same time, it is important to note that it is possible to go to the other extreme in teaching children. Parents must be careful not to damage their children's lightheartedness by overloading them with cognitive input and distorting them into precocious learning machines!

Children derive enormous benefit from nondoctrinaire verbal instruction. They have a tremendous need to talk about, think about, and understand the world around them. They have an almost inexhaustible curiosity about the important whys and wherefores of life. When allowed to ask as many questions as they want, they often intuitively design their own program of expansive learning.

If parents take the time to simplify their language, and use dialogue rather than lecture, they can satisfactorily answer almost any of their children's questions; and if they have the right encyclopedia they may even be able to answer the proverbial "Why is the sky blue?"

There is so much important practical information that parents can share with their children about the world. Children need open discussion about the many complex tasks and processes necessary for developing into healthy adults. They need their parents' guidance around issues of time, money, values, morality, sex, and self-discipline. They need help dealing with their feelings, establishing their boundaries, claiming their basic human rights, and developing constructive ways to handle conflicts with others.

Generosity in talking with children is not a black-and-white issue. Parents do not have to be at the constant beck and call of their children. Once the child is past the helpless stage, parents need to have their own undisturbed private time. This matches the child's ongoing need to be able to do the same – to gradually learn more and more self-soothing and self-nurturing behaviors. Within a context of balance, parents can still make themselves liberally available for conversation with their children.

HEALING VERBAL NEGLECT

The newly won capacity to accept his feelings frees the way for the patient's long repressed needs and wishes . . . Among these is every human being's central need to express himself – to show himself to the world as he really is – in word, in gesture, in behavior, in every genuine utterance from the baby's cry to the artist's creation.

– Alice Miller

If we have suffered prolonged verbal neglect in childhood, we may still be in need of the types of verbal nurturance described in the previous section. Some survivors are fortunate to have received this kind of nurturance through the loving interest of people outside their family. Considerable healing can happen when we have at least one friend or ally who consistently encourages our verbal self-expression, and easily notices and points out what is good and special about us.

I have also observed many clients and friends making great gains in their verbal and emotional self-expression through attending meetings of the various Twelve Step programs

currently proliferating across America. Codependents Anonymous and Adult Children of Alcoholic or Dysfunctional Families hold regular meetings that are therapeutically helpful to many survivors. These meetings encourage authentic self-expression in a safe, supportive environment where survivors can discuss the details of their childhood abuse and neglect. Sharing one's story and hearing the stories of others powerfully ameliorates toxic shame. It also helps many survivors to further dissolve their denial and minimization.

Twelve Step meetings take place in most large cities and are free or request a modest donation. Information about them can usually be obtained through the local Alcoholics Anonymous chapter.

Positive self-talk is another powerful tool for making up the deficits of encouragement and praise in early family life. Many survivors learn to improve the way they talk to themselves by attending personal growth classes and by reading self-help books. Gay Hendricks' book *Learning To Love Yourself* is a superlative introduction to positive self-talk. It contains powerful advice on how to be self-supportive during the most difficult times. If these sources are not sufficient for restoring self-esteem, psychotherapy may be in order.

PSYCHOTHERAPY RESUSCITATES SELF-EXPRESSION

Freud discovered that in the end, the main method of helping people to outgrow their buried emotional past and to free themselves for a new development of personality toward friendly, spontaneous, and creative living in the present, was simply to leave the person entirely free to talk out whatever occurred to him.

– Harry Guntrip, psychoanalyst

Survivors usually feel that something very important is missing from their lives until they experience the healing effects of telling someone else the full unexpurgated story of their lives. Effective psychotherapy allows and encourages us to share our feelings and secrets, fears and embarrassments in a compassionate, accepting environment. The sense of well-being that comes from being fully heard feels so good, right, and natural that most survivors eventually become motivated to seek such experiences elsewhere in their lives. Therapy often comes to a natural conclusion when this type of experience becomes more available in other intimate relationships.

Many survivors, however, require long-term therapy before they regain relatively full self-expression. The amount of time involved usually reflects the degree to which early verbal expression was neglected or actively thwarted. It sometimes takes years to develop enough trust to talk unashamedly about all aspects of personal experience.

The liberation of verbal self-expression frequently precedes the reclaiming of feelings. As a survivor discovers that her therapist is never shaming or abusive about what she has to say, she begins to feel safe enough to connect with and express her feelings; at that point she begins the journey of becoming fully feeling.

Survivors need to be wary of therapists who haven't done sufficient recovery work around their own childhood and family of origin issues. It is a sad fact that few training programs require therapists to undergo their own therapy. Moreover, many programs contain little or no emphasis

on understanding the influence of childhood on behavior.

When I state this to people I meet, they often look at me in disbelief; yet the fact is that the dominant paradigm in psychotherapy today is the cognitive-behavioral approach. This perspective overfocuses on the present and future, and often actively spurns the notion that an examination of the past is of any value.

Unfortunately, this has produced a shocking state of affairs in which many psychotherapists practice therapy without having adequately addressed their own childhood issues. Such therapists are prone to “reparent” their clients with the same dysfunctional style of parenting they themselves experienced. I have heard many accounts of such therapists blatantly shaming, manipulating, and controlling their clients in ways that are typical of dysfunctional parents. I therefore recommend that survivors choose therapists who have worked extensively on their own childhood issues. Therapists of this ilk are usually willing to pay testimony to their own recovery work.

I also recommend that clients allow themselves to speak up whenever they feel shamed or criticized by their therapists’ responses. One of the most healing experiences of therapy occurs when a therapist and client fully explore a misunderstanding that occurs between them. When therapists encourage clients to voice their complaints, they help heal the damage that comes from growing up with parents and authority figures who demand absolute, unquestioning compliance. Healthy therapists therefore welcome critical feedback and work with it in a way that deepens trust and the capacity for intimacy. If a therapist shames or attacks you for questioning him or her, it is usually a good idea to terminate the therapy.

When therapy is effective, most survivors become better listeners as well as better communicators. They often move quite naturally and spontaneously into offering their intimates the kind of listening that they have found so healing in their therapy. The equal exchange of welcoming, nonjudgmental listening is an essential, irreplaceable process in building intimacy and love. We would heal the plague of modern loneliness and alienation if we all allowed each other the full self-expression that Rilke describes in this poem:

*... I want to unfold
I don't want to stay folded anywhere,
because where I am folded, there I am a lie.
And I want my grasp of things
true before you. I want to describe myself
like a painting that I looked at
closely for a long time.*

EMOTIONAL NEGLECT

*For the most part, mental illness is caused by an absence of or defect
in the love that a particular child required from its particular parents
for successful maturation and spiritual growth.*

– M. Scott Peck, *The Road Less Traveled*

When parents are emotionally repressed, children are deprived of models for healthy emotional expression. Many children never learn safe ways to show or convey tenderness, anger, enthusiasm, fear, sorrow, or love. Eventually, they lose access to their inborn ability to feel and emote.

Feelingless parents cannot help but deprive their children of loving warmth and tenderness, and this absence of love is the most detrimental aspect of emotional neglect. Love is the most essential ingredient of healthy parenting. The failure to consistently express and radiate feelings of love toward children is grievous emotional neglect.

Emotional neglect causes children to feel worthless, unlovable, and empty. Insufficient love creates a hunger that gnaws deeply at the center of their being. Children who are unable to get love from their parents eventually seek relief from this hunger in all the wrong places. They are at great risk of using food, alcohol or drugs as surrogates for love, or of using compulsive study, work or busyness to distract them from the pain of lovelessness. They are also highly susceptible to entering “love” relationships with people as incapable of love as their parents.

Emotional neglect is especially difficult to comprehend for those adult children who were frequently told in emotionally empty words: “Of course we love you.” If the phrase “I love you” is never substantiated by a loving emotional state in the parent, it cannot meet the child’s need to be loved. “I love you” could be uttered a million times with absolutely no benefit if the emotions, actions, and communications of the parent are not truly loving.

Emotional love is a feeling that cannot be directly perceived or measured. Because of this, many of us use denial and minimization to dismiss or devalue its importance. Yet when love is truly felt, it is as real as the smell of jasmine and the taste of honey. In fact, when love is fully felt or emoted, it is so palpable that it is almost hyper-real. Love adds richness and meaning to life as nothing else can. For the infant child, love is as essential as food for the maintenance of life and growth.

Many survivors suffer intensely from a lack of love without knowing that it is lovelessness that causes them so much pain. Some of us reside incessantly in this pain because we were forced to give up on intimacy so early in life. It is gravely important that we comprehend the immeasurable loss of such relinquishment. Loving connection with others is our emotional lifeblood and without it few of us are able to really value our lives. Many of us do not discover our yearning for the manna of intimacy until we open to our grieving or are graced with at least one truly loving friend or ally.

MIRRORING

Out of this will come a person who is going to have a good image of herself. Someone who will be able to walk into rooms without undue shyness, believe that other people like her, accept praise for her work as due, and smile at the nice reflection of herself in other people’s eyes just as she smiles back at what she sees in the mirror.

– Nancy Friday

The strongest channel for conveying love to an infant is an emotional one. Infants prosper

from warm and tender heart-to-heart connections with their parents. When parents emote love, their infants are filled with feelings of peace, safety, and well-being. Real love often makes them smile and coo with delight.

Infants quickly learn to associate parental love with the smiling, appreciative facial expressions of their parents. When infants or young children gaze into their parents' eyes, it is as if they are looking to find a pleasing picture of themselves reflected there. Therapists call this *mirroring*, and children can actually see a mirror-like reflection of themselves in the pupils of their parents' eyes in the right light and at the right distance. You can test this for yourself by looking for your reflection in a friend's pupils from about twelve inches away.

Mirroring also refers to the overall impression that parents reflect to their children. When they look at their children, they can reflect back either a positive or a negative image. If children see displeasure in their parents' expressions, it is as if they themselves are displeasing. If instead they see delight and love, it is as if they themselves are delightful and lovable.

Smiles, hugs, "laptime," tender touch, melodic tone of voice, and greetings of welcome are the natural physical manifestations of loving feelings. These signals soothe children and convey to them living proof that they are lovable.

The very foundation of self-esteem, as well as its basic structure, is cemented with ongoing experiences of feeling parental love. Children are able to *feel* good about themselves to the degree that they have warm, relatively constant, loving connections with their parents. Parents of course cannot feel or act lovingly all the time. Nonetheless responsible parents emotionally feed their children with generous amounts of loving gestures that are least sometimes accompanied by genuine love and acceptance.

FAILURE TO THRIVE

. . . totally dependent and totally at the mercy of its parents for all forms of sustenance and means of survival. To the child, abandonment by its parents is the equivalent of death.

– Scott Peck

Anyone who has taken a course in basic psychology has probably seen the poignant film of Harlowe's experiment with baby monkeys. In this awful experiment, baby monkeys are raised without real mothers. They are instead provided with two different surrogate mothers. One artificial mother is made of wire and has a nipple that dispenses milk. The other is made of soft cuddly material but provides no milk. In one part of this experiment, baby monkeys invariably turn to the soft mothers for sleep and comfort even though they get all their food from the wire mothers. In another part of the experiment, baby monkeys raised only with wire mothers do not survive.

Human babies have the same need for the softness, affection, and touch of a loving parent. Babies who are not consistently picked up and cuddled sometimes die. The role of lack of touch in infant mortality has been well documented in many orphanages and pediatric hospitals. This fatal syndrome is known as *failure to thrive*.

Failure to thrive is not an all-or-none issue, however. Only extreme cases of emotional

and tactile neglect lead to physical death. Less extreme instances of emotional deprivation may still cause serious consequences. The child's body and mind may develop normally but his spirit and soul may atrophy. In our culture so many of us are raised on famine-like rations of love that few of us thrive spiritually or emotionally.

HEALING EMOTIONAL NEGLECT

Now the patient does not make light of manifestations of his self any more, does not laugh or jeer at them . . . This would mean: I can be sad or happy whenever anything makes me sad or happy; I don't have to look cheerful for someone else, and I don't have to suppress my distress or anxiety to fill other people's needs. I can be angry and no one will die . . .

– Alice Miller

Developing a loving, heart-centered connection with one's self is an essential process of recovery. Many of us who suffered ongoing rejection from our parents initially find this proposition inconceivable, but I believe that almost everyone can learn to give themselves the love they need and deserve.

In the early stages of recovery, survivors sometimes need a great deal of modeling and nurturing from others to regerminate the seed of self-compassion and keep it growing and developing. Some survivors are lucky enough to get this from authentically loving friends and allies. Those who are not so fortunate may need to work with a heart-centered psychotherapist.

Survivors who were constantly neglected or abused may require years of therapy before they are able to begin to “get” that they are indeed lovable. Therapists who help their clients rediscover their lovableness are usually those who naturally proffer Galway Kinnell's poetic sentiment:

*The bud stands for all things
Even those that don't flower
Because everything flowers from
Within, of self-blessing.
Though sometimes it is necessary
To reteach a thing its loveliness
To put a hand on its brow
And retell it in words and in heart
It is lovely
Until it flowers again from within,
Of self-blessing . . .*

It has been professionally taboo for many years for therapists to talk about loving their

clients. At long last, more and more therapists are coming to believe that love is the most essential healing ingredient of the therapeutic process. Carl Rogers, the pioneer and perhaps most influential voice of Humanistic Psychology, used the term “unconditional positive regard” to describe love, which he regarded as the most important principle of therapeutic healing. And renowned psychiatrist M. Scott Peck strongly embraces Jung’s position in the following statement from *The Road Less Traveled*:

It is no more inappropriate for a psychotherapist to have feelings of love for a patient than it is for a good parent to have feelings of love for a child. To the contrary, it is essential for the therapist to love the patient for therapy to be successful . . . (And) There is nothing inappropriate about patients coming to love a therapist who truly listens to them hour after hour in a nonjudgmental way, who truly accepts them as they probably have never been accepted before, who totally refrains from using them and who has been helpful in alleviating their suffering . . . so that the patient can experience a successful love relationship, often for the first time.

Bryan Whittine, psychotherapist and co-founder of the Department of Transpersonal Psychology at John F. Kennedy University also embraces this position:

Clients who change most in psychotherapy are often those whose relationships with their therapists are full of love . . . this suggests that the primary healing power in psychotherapy is not insight, but love.

Further support for this position comes from a famous survey, reported in a number of psychotherapy journals, that once queried a large sample of clients who were treated with a wide variety of therapeutic approaches. When asked what was of the greatest help to them, the most common response across the board was that they felt that their therapists had really cared about them.

Once clients internalize the love of the therapist and turn it into self-compassion, they begin to become a primary source of love for themselves. And while self-support never replaces the need for the love of others, healthy self-love invariably attracts mutually loving relationships with others. As our impediments to experiencing a loving heart connection with ourself are dissolved, it becomes easier and easier to receive love from others and to radiate it towards them in return.

SPIRITUAL ABUSE

Many parents reinforce their verbal, emotional, and physical abuse with frightening messages about a reviling and violently punishing god. *Spiritual abuse* occurs when parents cite

God as a vengeful disciplinarian who orders or validates cruelty to children.

Spiritual abuse typically contains a strong emotional component in which children are filled with “the fear of God.” God is presented to them in terms that are the antithesis of love. They are taught that God will punish them in unimaginably cruel ways if they do not give up (sacrifice) many of their normal and wonderful ways of being.

Many of us were taught that some of the most healthy aspects of our self-expression – sex, joy, pleasure, relaxation, balanced self-interest – are sinful and evil. As a Catholic child I was told that I was born with a stain on my soul that made me disgusting in the sight of God. Nuns told me over and over that no matter how well I behaved, I would still, at best, burn in purgatory for thousands of years, even if I was perfectly saintly for the rest of my life.

I was also taught that any thoughts or feelings of mine that had anything to do with self-satisfaction would earn me eons more in purgatory, if not an eternity in hell. It was a long time before my denial dissolved enough for me to remember how terrified I was as an impressionable pre-schooler at the visions of burning forever in the darkness and despair of hell.

The pain of my Catholic indoctrination in shame and fear peaked in adolescence when the clergy brainwashed me into believing that every sexual thought or feeling I had was a mortal sin – any one of which “merited” an especially excruciating place in hell. Naïve, fervent, and totally unable to squelch my pubescent preoccupation with sexual fantasy, I despaired that nothing could save me from the doom of my impure thoughts – not even taking up permanent residence in the confessional. I was miserably lost in deep self-loathing and despair almost all of the time. (The psychotic ranting against sex of the Catholic priest in the movie *Heaven Can Wait* accurately portrays the poisonous invective I was frequently subjected to during ten years of brainwashing in Catholic schools.)

Many survivors live their whole lives in denial about how much old spiritual beliefs have hurt them and continue to curtail their lives. Barely conscious feelings of guilt, shame, and fear constantly inhibit them from enjoying the normal, life-celebratory aspects of human existence. I have met many ex-Catholics who have tremendous difficulty enjoying sex. This was true for me for almost twenty years. Even though I paid lip service to renouncing the religious shaming of sexual pleasure, I knew little about the wondrous joys of sex until I grieved the losses that accompanied my spiritual abuse.

I have also worked with many survivors who cannot nurture themselves because self-kindness triggers intense flashbacks of guilt and shame. Some still believe that self-serving behavior is so repugnant to God that they cannot even think of doing something for themselves without feeling that they are bad and wickedly selfish. How woeful it is to be stuck with an image of God as a vindictive super-parent whose only concern is amassing proof that we are fundamentally bad and unworthy.

Overcoming this type of spiritual abuse is especially difficult for survivors who were turned against themselves so early in life that they accept self-alienation as a natural state. Nonetheless, survivors owe it to themselves to identify the specifics of their spiritual abuse so that they can free themselves from destructive beliefs and fears about God.

Grieving is usually necessary in working through spiritual obstacles to recovery. The ventilation of angry feelings about the despoilment of healthy self-interest helps us disidentify from destructive spiritual beliefs.

There are also therapy groups available in many large cities which focus on recovery from the anti-self brainwashing of fundamentalist religions and sects. Among these are self-help

groups, loosely modeled on Alcoholics Anonymous, for recovering fundamentalists and Catholics. (I would like to note here that while it appears that the Catholic Church has become more humanistic in recent years, it was as toxically shaming as most fundamentalist religions prior to the sixties.)

SPIRITUAL NEGLECT

*He lay on the couch night after night
mouth open, the darkness of the room
filling his mouth, and no one knew
my father was eating his children. He seemed to
rest so quietly, vast body
inert on the sofa, big hand
fallen away from the glass.
What could be more passive than a man
passed out every night – and yet as he lay
on his back, snoring, our lives slowly
disappeared down the hole of his life.*

– Sharon Olds

Spiritual neglect occurs when children are not exposed to religious or philosophical perspectives that help them to see the good in life and themselves. It also occurs when they are given no guidance on how to self-compassionately deal with life's inevitable losses and disappointments.

Spiritual neglect usually accompanies spiritual abuse and is as rampant in this culture as emotional impoverishment. Many of the dominant religions are based on shame and fear of God, and offer little in the way of guidance and insight about the positive meanings of life. Life is often viewed only as a travail of suffering and punishment that must be stoically endured. Many clerics completely ignore the considerable grace and wonder that are as much a part of life as hardship and loss.

The modern sermon is much like the news, full of doom and dire stories of wickedness. Both sermons and news scantily focus on the good and loving deeds that are also quite common in human behavior. And just as the news inundates us with frightening, unwelcoming pictures of the world, most clerics offer us little encouragement or guidance on how to embrace and celebrate the gift of life. Instead, they morbidly focus on avoiding the horrific tortures of hell and preparing for what is often a very unimaginable and dreary afterlife. Modern depictions of heaven, with its white robes and cottony clouds, strike me as having a frightening resemblance to the sterile and deadened ambience of hospitals and nursing homes.

HEALING SPIRITUAL NEGLECT

Deep in their roots, all flowers keep the light.

– Anonymous

I am heartened to see in myself, my friends, and many of my clients the reemergence of a very personal kind of spirituality. This spirituality is nondogmatic and nonsectarian (although some combine it with a traditional religious practice), and seems to emerge naturally in those who take the time to explore the depths of themselves. Rumi wrote poetically about this:

*If a fir tree had a foot or two like a turtle, or a wing,
Do you think it would just wait for the saw to enter?
And you, if you have no feet to leave your country,
go into yourself,
become a ruby mine,
open to the gifts of the sun.*

Those who awaken to an inner spirituality often experience a deep knowing that there is a benevolent power underlying or overlooking everything and everyone. The Indian mystic Ghalib wrote:

*In our hall of mirrors, the map of the one face appears
As the sun's splendor would spangle a world made of dew.*

Some individuals directly experience the spiritual realm as grace emanating from a traditional representation of God, often in an inner vision. Others experience grace as coming from a more nebulous source which, depending on the individual, might be called Higher Power, Spirit, Higher Self, Love, Oneness, or Unity Consciousness.

Despite these differences, there are key similarities in most direct experiences of spirit. Most people report a powerful inner experience of being supported and cared for by something much greater than the self or another human being.

Transpersonal therapists use the term *numinous* to describe profound, uplifting emotional experiences that seem to emanate from a divine source. Numinous experiences are transformative. They open our hearts in a way that heals the feelings of forsakenness that may have plagued us since childhood. The tenth century Christian mystic Symeon wrote eloquently about numinous experiences:

*And everything that is hurt, everything
that seemed to us dark, harsh, shameful,
maimed, ugly, irreparably
damaged, is in Him transformed
and recognized as whole, as lovely,
and radiant in His light*

*we awaken as the Beloved
in every last part of our body.*

Like all experiences with deep emotional content, numinous experiences are transitory. They are, however, so heartfelt and soul-stirring that their afterglow can last for a very long time. Even just one of these experiences is often enough to leave an individual, no matter how tragic his losses, unshakably convinced of the ultimate goodness and love of the Creator. They also typically unfold further into an ever-deepening access to intuition – in the way that intuition can be a subtler arising of the divine as an inner source of love, guidance, and nurturance.

GRIEVING AS SPIRITUAL PRACTICE

*The grief you cry out draws you toward union
Your pure sadness that wants help is the secret cup
Listen to the moan of the dog for its master
That whining is the connection
There are love dogs no one knows the names of
Give your life to one of them*

– Rumi

*This is perhaps the most difficult of the balancing acts we come to
learn: to trust the pain as well as the light, to allow the grief to
penetrate as it will while keeping open to the perfection of the
universe.*

– Jack Kornfield

Many people have their first numinous experience through a spiritual practice based on prayer or meditation. Others, like myself, experience numinous openings through grieving. Grieving can stimulate a profoundly moving opening to an authentic inner connection with the divine. As grieving naturally promotes the rebirth of aspects of ourselves lost in childhood, the greatest of these rebirths is the rebirth of a sense of spiritual belonging.

My most powerful numinous experiences have been grief-inspired. They have momentarily expanded my consciousness in ways that have made life's painful contradictions and inconsistencies bearable and understandable. They have allowed me to appreciate the necessary interdependence of life and death, joy and pain, achievement and failure, love and loneliness, meaningfulness and confusion. They have revived me from some of my most devastating life experiences and restored me to a certainty that life is still the most magnificent of gifts, even though it is also liberally punctuated with periods of pain and suffering. On many occasions, grieving has brought me the kind of transcendent deliverance described by Tagore:

I thought that my voyage had come to its end, at the last limits of my

power – that the path before me was closed, that provisions were exhausted and the time come to take shelter in silent obscurity. But I find Thy will knows no end in me. And when old words die out on the tongue, new melodies break forth from the heart; and where the old tracks are lost, new country is revealed in its wonder.

Along with love and peace and beauty, God made pain and loss and suffering. Our ability to fully appreciate life depends on our willingness to sometimes feel sad and angry about our own and others' misfortunes and difficulties. The tools of grieving are gifts from God that enable us to integrate and grow from life's inexorable hardships, and then to return to gratitude for its wonders.

On numerous occasions I have felt as if grieving cleansed my heart and psyche, and restored me to an appreciation of the miracles of God's creation. At such times, grieving made real the words of Emily Dickinson:

Nature, the Gentlest Mother, is Impatient of no Child.

And what breathtaking beauty and intricacy exists in the world of nature! What a wealth of species, ecosystems, landscapes, and panoramas there is to discover and enjoy! What a wonder it is to be in a body that can feel the warmth of the sun, the cool of the breeze, and the sweet tenderness of a lover's kiss! What a privilege to be able to stroll and walk about the wild and open places. The Navajo prayer *Night Way* reminds us of this:

Through the returning seasons may I walk. In beauty may I walk. All day long may I walk. Beauty will I possess again. Beautiful birds . . . Beautiful joyful birds . . . On the trail marked with pollen may I walk. With grasshoppers about my feet may I walk. With dew about my feet may I walk. With beauty before me may I walk. With beauty behind me may I walk. With beauty above me may I walk. With beauty all around me may I walk. In old age wandering on a trail of beauty, lively, may I walk.

Grieving has also moved me to notice the spiritual beauty of many other human beings. How miraculous that many of us can at times be deeply caring and loving despite our own woundedness.

And grieving has invariably healed me from the despair of feeling brokenhearted by a friend or lover's momentary betrayal or abandonment, and restored me once again to the most precious gift of all: full, authentic, loving connection with another.

When we recover a bodily-based spirituality, we gain all the grace, strength, and guidance that we need to have an enduring love affair with life. A spirituality that is based in reality gradually decreases the despair of the abused and abandoned inner child and replaces it with a

sense of hope and meaning. Ralph Metzner, psychotherapist and professor of consciousness studies, testifies to this:

Out of the turmoil and darkness of dying comes the sparkling vitality of the newborn self. This new self is connected to the eternal source of all life, the source from which we all derive, the divine essence within. It is therefore aptly named the “eternal child.”

The spirituality that unfolds from grieving naturally enhances the process of rediscovering and reparenting the inner child. Reparenting, the subject of the next chapter, is a powerful tool for aiding our recovery from the verbal, emotional, and spiritual abuse and neglect described in this chapter.

SELF-COMPASSIONATE REPARING

Actual child abuse always reflects a lack of connection to and respect for the internal or psychic child.

– Robert Stein

The real value of psychoanalysis is to improve parenting.

– Sigmund Freud

In every adult there lurks a child – an eternal child, something that is always becoming, is never completed, and calls for unceasing care, attention, and education. That is the part of the human personality which wants to develop and become whole.

– Carl Jung

Self-compassionate reparenting is a term I have coined to describe my approach to remothering and refathering the inner child. When we practice self-compassionate reparenting, we identify and provide for the unmet needs of our childhood so that we can grow into more complete, life-loving human beings.

Self-reparenting rescues us from being needlessly frozen in old childhood fear and deprivation. When we understand how childhood abuse and neglect left us developmentally arrested, empathy naturally arises and motivates us to care for and protect ourselves. As this occurs, we commonly discover that our maturation process was suspended at various different stages of development, and that we have a number of inner children awaiting our kindness and protection. Among these are the inner infant, inner toddler, inner preschooler, and so on. These distinctions are important because children have different needs at different developmental stages, and these correspond with a variety of different reparenting tasks.

Many survivors are uncomfortable with the concept of the inner child because they were forced at an early age to become miniature adults and to hate their childlike characteristics as

much as their parents did. Survivors who do not like their inner children, or children in general for that matter, are often those who were not liked as children.

Many of us were so traumatized for being and acting childlike that we had to move from toddlerhood to adulthood in astoundingly brief periods of time. Various combinations of shame, punishment, and abandonment forced us to forfeit childhood and to act like grown-ups even before we were ready for school. Hal and Sidra Stone elaborate on this:

Perhaps the most universally disowned self in our civilized world is the Vulnerable Child. Yet this vulnerable child may be our most precious subpersonality – the closest to our essence – the one that enables us to become truly intimate, to fully experience others, and to love.

When a child is not allowed to be a child, she abandons her child-self and banishes it to her unconscious and tries to behave like an adult. Many of us find it difficult to get an authentic sense of our inner child because that part of ourselves is still hiding somewhere out of awareness, much like the actual child who had to hide in closets or bedrooms to escape abuse. The child-self often stays sequestered in the unconscious because the adult survivor, like his biological parents, reviles it whenever it emerges into awareness seeking help or attention.

Inner children everywhere languish in the unconscious, awaiting our compassion for their terrible plight. Self-compassionate reparenting begins with the decision to love our inner children and protect them from self-abuse.

As with healthy parenting, self-compassionate reparenting is a complex, multidimensional task, the full exploration of which is outside the scope of this book. More global information on self-reparenting is contained in Jeremy Abrams' excellent collection of writings on the subject, *Reclaiming the Inner Child*.

For the purposes of becoming more fully feeling, we will focus here primarily on the emotional tasks of the reparenter. These constellate around two crucial goals: the recovery and ongoing development of our inborn sense of self-acceptance, and the reestablishment and strengthening of our instinctive sense of self-protection.

I find it useful to label these two tasks as self-mothering and self-fathering, respectively. There are two reasons for this. The first is that this somewhat specious distinction helps clarify the differences between the two key processes of emotional caretaking: unconditional love and unrelenting self-protection (which has its roots in the emotion of anger). The second is that the inner child often expects to receive these two different types of emotional support along traditional gender lines. Although these distinctions are sexist and false, the inner child is often not capable of being politically correct about them. He often dreams of having a mommy who is tender and a daddy who stands up for him.

Once again, I make this distinction as a teaching aid, and whether or not you find it useful, you can become your own key source of both loving tenderness and fierce protectiveness, regardless of your gender. Men can imagine themselves rocking or breast-feeding their inner infant just as women can imagine themselves fighting off anyone who is threatening to their inner child. This is similar to what occurs in a functional family. Both biological parents share in

the mothering and fathering of their children, and both move easily and flexibly between the roles of tenderness and strength. I am happy and heartened to see many of my friends who are parents moving towards a greater balance in these roles.

REPARING BEGINS WITH FORGIVING THE INNER CHILD

It sometimes seems outlandish to me that we need to forgive the children in us who were so innocent and undeserving of blame. What a cruel irony that we need to forgive the blameless, yet we must let our inner children know that we forgive them because, like our parents, we have been blaming since time immemorial. Real forgiveness, as we will see in [Chapter 13](#), begins with the self. Forgiving our inner children is a powerful avenue into self-forgiveness. In the words of self-esteem guru Nathaniel Branden:

When we learn to forgive the child we once were for what he or she didn't know, or couldn't do, or couldn't cope with, or felt or didn't feel; when we understand and accept that child was struggling to survive the best way he or she could – then the adult self is no longer in adversarial relationship to the child-self. One part is not at war with another part.

Our inner child's heart, broken by a dearth of compassionate mothering, begins to heal when we turn inward with unconditional love and forgiveness. We add substance to this self-mothering by offering the child ongoing tenderness, listening, affection, and unconditional love. Consistency in such practice is what allows our inner child to feel truly forgiven.

We also enhance forgiveness by championing our inner child in a father-like way. We do this by using anger and blame to fight off internal or external aggression. Such actions prove to the child that she is not only forgiven, but also no longer subject to unfair blame.

The efficacy of our rearing is further enhanced by providing our inner children the verbal, spiritual and emotional nurturance outlined in [Appendix A](#). When we give our inner children love, understanding, and protection consistently over time, they begin to shed their horrible burdens of fear, shame, and emptiness.

As we become more successful in resisting the shaming and terrorizing attacks of our internalized critical parents, our inner children begin to feel safe enough to come forth in all their vital wonder and beauty. Normal qualities of human existence like joy, peacefulness, friendliness, spontaneity, and playfulness naturally begin to reemerge as we master the practice of rearing.

My inner child is now free to reward me liberally with his childlike exuberance because years of consistent support during the difficult and painful times have convinced him that I am truly there for him. One of the most precious gifts I received from my inner child came through dialoguing with him about the past. His vivid recollections of the joyousness of time spent in nature and in playing sports inspired me to re-elevate these godsend of my youth into high priorities in my life. Nathaniel Branden testifies to the attainability of this type of experience:

Recognized, accepted, embraced, and thereby integrated, a child-self can be a magnificent resource that enriches our lives, with its potential for spontaneity, playfulness, and imaginativeness.

TALKING TO AND FOR THE INNER CHILD

The way I treat my inner child is the way I am going to treat my outer child.

– Robert Stein

We heal ourselves with self-fathering when we use our anger and blame to challenge inner messages of shame and self-hate. Speaking up in a protective way for the inner child makes it safe enough for her to once again inhabit consciousness. You might benefit from reviewing the self-talk techniques in [Chapter 7](#) that show us how to protect the inner child from the attacks of the inner critical parent.

Toxic shame often erupts with no warning. I try to father and defend my child at such times by rejecting these echoes of my parents' shaming messages. I explain to him that my parents have, and had, no right to talk to him that way. If I have numbly repeated the lies and shamings of old authority figures, I apologize to him and recommit to eliminating this old self-destructive habit.

I usually supplement my self-fathering with the kind of mothering that feeds self-esteem with positive and supportive statements. I imagine my inner child sitting on my lap or resting in my heart. I remind him that he is absolutely and eminently lovable just as he is. And then I soothe him with words of this nature:

I love to have you near me, Pete. You are such a joy to me. I love it when you talk to me and tell me how it is for you. I want to hear everything you have to say. I want to be the one person you can always come to whenever you need help. You can come to me when you are hurting, when you just want company, or when you want to play. You are always welcome. You are a delight to my eyes, and I always enjoy having you around. You are a good boy, very special and absolutely worthy of love, respect, and all good things. I am so proud of you and so glad that you are alive. I will help you in any way that I can. I want to be the loving mom and dad you were so unfairly deprived of, and that you so much deserve. And I want you to know that I have an especially loving place in my heart for you when you are scared or sad or mad or ashamed. You can always come to me and tell me about such feelings, and I will be with you and try to soothe you until those feelings run their natural course. I want to become your best friend and I will always try to protect you from unfairness and humiliation. I will also seek friends for you who

genuinely like you and who are truly on your side. We will only befriend people who are fair, who treat us with equality and respect, and who listen to us as much as we listen to them. I want to help you learn that it really is good to have needs and desires. It's wonderful that you have feelings. It's healthy to be mad and sad and scared and depressed at times. It's natural to make mistakes. And it's okay to feel good too, and even to have more fun than mom and dad did.

At other times when my heart opens to my inner child I tell him how much I wish I could have saved him from the constant yelling and hitting. I remind him that I feel especially tender towards him when he cries or gets angry about how much he got picked on and knocked around by the many adults that had power over him.

I also remind him of my patience and empathy for his fear around new unknown adults. How could he not sometimes flashback in fear – afraid of being suddenly slapped or criticized by them? I reassure him that I will never allow anyone to abuse him again. No one will be allowed to slap him with a hand or with words. I remind him that I have a healthy anger now that can be summoned up to ward off, or “write off,” abusers.

When we consistently give our inner children this kind of support, we suffer less and less paralysis from toxic shame. We become skilled at transforming the inverted anger of self-hatred into a defense against the critical parent. Parental rulership of our psyches gradually dissipates, and we are able to treat normal mistakes as learning experiences rather than as proof of our defectiveness. The demon of perfectionism loses its grip on our psyches, and we begin to cherish our differences and imperfections as the unique treasures of character and being they are.

I have been so healed through this process that I now value many things about myself that were formerly perpetual sources of shame and self-abandonment. What I used to disparage as “my moodiness” now strikes me as emotional richness and flexibility. My need for considerable introversion, which used to be my all-time greatest defect, has now become the much appreciated matrix of my rich inner life. My “streak shooting” in basketball no longer sends me down the drain of toxic shame, although I will probably always prefer the hot streaks to the cold ones. Moreover, I can now savor my few remaining addictions: nonstop gum-chewing, long telephone conversations, daily grilled cheese sandwiches, writing with ink in books, and crying at sentimental movies.

I can also graciously accept the moans that I occasionally evoke in others via my habit of telling bad jokes. Even my feelings of inferiority about my appearance have almost totally vanished. I now really like the imperfections that for many years made me feel so ugly that I wouldn't dare approach the opposite sex. I have grown to love my freckles, my leanness, my oft-broken nose, my eyebrows that grow together, and the big space between my front teeth. And perhaps best of all, I now frequently hear a voice that automatically says “I love you” instead of “nice going klutz” whenever I accidentally drop or bump into something.

I have also noticed that since my inner critic lost its job as boss of my consciousness, I am far less critical and perfectionistically expectant of others. I believe this has made me safer and more comfortable to be around. Others seem to be able to be more authentic and vulnerable with me. This in turn creates a mutuality of safety and authenticity that allows me to make new friends on an ongoing basis.

As new friends come into my life, my sense of belonging increases and now begins to feel like something comfortingly tribal. I feel as though the enormous loneliness of my loveless youth is largely dissipated. And it continually decreases as my social network expands through meeting “good” people from all walks of life. Formerly limited to only engaging with those who closely mirrored my beliefs and values, I now find myself enjoying an ever-enlarging sample of people. How fascinating our diversity in responding to the complexities of human existence!

One of my greatest delights in being a therapist is witnessing my clients making similar gains in their lives through reparenting. Many develop trustworthy relationships for the first time in their lives. Many awake from years of stagnation to become wholeheartedly excited about new endeavors or old reclaimed enthusiasms. How wonderful it is when a client comes in proudly reporting that over the weekend she flew a kite, made a friend, climbed a tree, took a dance class, started a garden, went roller-skating, frolicked on the water slides, enrolled in an arts and crafts class, or identified fifteen different wild flowers on a camping trip!

SELF-MOTHERING

If we have lived behind a mask all our lives, sooner or later – if we are lucky – that mask will be smashed . . . Perhaps we will look into the terrified eyes of our own tiny child, that child who has never known love and who now beseeches us to respond.

– Marion Woodman

The violation of the natural weakness and simplicity of the young child – these wounds may be redeemed through the natural simplicity of loving; indeed, they may offer the gateway through which love may enter.

– Jean Houston

The most essential task of self-mothering is restoring the individual to a deeply felt sense that he is lovable and deserves to be loved. Self-mothering is the practice of actively and passively loving the inner child in all his mental, emotional, and energetic states.

Self-mothering is based on the precept that unconditional love is every child’s birthright. As mother to myself, I am eternally committed to relating to myself from a compassionate point of view. I strive to give my inner child an experience of a completely non-defended relationship with another human being.

Self-mothering proceeds most effectively from the realization that self-punishment is counterproductive. Self-mothering is a hardy refusal to indulge self-hatred. Understanding and gentle guidance are more effective than self-rejection in achieving self-discipline and remedying self-destructive behavior.

We enhance our self-mothering skills by imaginatively creating a safe place in our hearts where our inner children are always welcome. This may help the inner child discover for the first time that it is possible to have a relationship with another that is not either empty or dangerous.

Consistent tenderness welcomes the child into the adult body he now inhabits, and shows him that it is now a nurturing place protected by a warm and powerful adult. One of Nathaniel Brandon's clients spoke about this as follows:

All these years I've tried to be an adult by denying the child I once was. I was so ashamed and hurt and angry. But I truly felt like an adult for the first time when I took her in my arms and accepted her as part of me.

Self-mothering can be enhanced through the use of the healing affirmations contained in [Appendix C](#). These are designed to satisfy the child's needs at the various stages of her development. Self-reparenters benefit from using these affirmations like prayers or mantras. Ongoing frequent repetition of these affirmations empowers them to gradually replace the self-criticisms that have been silently ingrained in our psyches by years of rote repetition. These affirmations are made even more potent when they are accompanied by visualizations of tenderly holding and comforting the inner child. With enough practice, these affirmations become as automatic as the old atrophying self-criticisms.

Another essential task of self-mothering involves offering the inner child the opportunity to speak unashamedly about any and all aspects of her experience. You are invited to initiate this process right now with a written exercise in which you ask your inner child to write a message to you with your non-dominant hand. You can further elicit her by writing something supportive back to her with your dominant hand. If you do this a few times a week for twenty minutes or so, it will not be long before you have established a therapeutic dialogue with your inner child. With practice, nurturing conversations can then take place anywhere, anytime, in the privacy and safety of your own psyche.

In early self-mothering, the inner child commonly comes into consciousness with a dire need to express her unreleased reservoir of pain. She will not come forth on the condition that she behave only like a nice, pleasant little girl; that was the prohibition that banished her to the unconscious in the first place.

Most inner children initially need to spend significant amounts of time going over and grieving the detailed memories of their abuse and abandonment. They usually need a great deal of permission to complain, cry, and blame. When inner children are not shamed or rejected for catharting, they eventually feel safe enough to talk about other lost aspects of themselves, such as their dreams, needs, desires, joys, and enthusiasms.

Most of us inevitably slip back into treating our inner children as poorly as our parents did. This happens quite frequently in early recovery, but is usually remediable through the apologizing process described in [Chapter 12](#). Because every child is born with tremendous emotional flexibility, sincere and effective apologies usually restore their trust on those occasions when unconscious repetitions of parents' harsh judgments have forced them back into hiding.

SELF-FATHERING

Ultimately, love is self-approval.

– Sandra Ray

Children, abandoned either psychologically or in actuality, enter adulthood lacking any deep sense that the world is a safe and protective place.

– Scott Peck

While self-mothering focuses primarily on healing the wounds of neglect, self-fathering heals the wounds of abuse. Self-fathering gestates assertiveness and self-protection. It includes confronting external or internal abuse, and standing up for the adult child's rights, as described in [Appendix B](#).

One of my favorite self-fathering exercises is the *time machine rescue operation*. I have used it many times to fight off the impending paralysis of emotional flashbacks. At such times, I tell my inner child that, if time travel is ever possible, I will travel back into the past and put a stop to my parents' abusiveness. In the course of this I say things like:

I will grab mom and dad's arms and pin them behind their backs the second they try to strike you. I will muffle them with a gag so they can't scream at you or even mumble their criticisms. I'll put bags over their heads so they can't frown or glare at you. I'll make them go to bed right after dinner without dessert. I'll do anything you want me to do to protect you.

It never ceases to amaze me how such imagery usually provides an exit out of fear and shame, and sometimes even makes my inner child laugh in delight.

I sometimes finish this exercise by telling my inner child I would also report my parents to the authorities so they would be sent to counseling to become better parents. Or, I say that, if I could, I would take him back to live with me in the future before all those horrible things could happen to him. I remind him that he, in fact, lives in the present with me now, where I will always do my best to protect him.

When you consistently show your inner child that she is really safe and fully welcome in every aspect of her being, she will become more and more alive and self-expressive. As she experiences you consistently rising to her defense, she will feel free enough to reclaim the emotionality that fuels her innate spiritedness, playfulness, curiosity, and flexibility.

How different this approach to fathering is when compared to the traditional approach that Albert Einstein warned against:

It is, in fact, nothing short of a miracle that the modern methods of instruction have not yet entirely strangled the holy curiosity of inquiry; for this delicate little plant, aside from stimulation, stands

mostly in need of freedom; without this it goes to wreck and ruin without fail. It is a very grave mistake to think that the enjoyment of seeing and searching can be promoted by means of coercion and a sense of duty.

Reparenting and forgiving the inner child fosters authentic experiences of self-forgiveness. Once we understand how terribly abandoned the child was, we cannot help but have compassion for him or her. This compassion sometimes moves us to wonder about our parents' childhoods. As we understand the hardships of their upbringing, we sometimes feel like their childhood travails are extenuating circumstances that allow us to feel forgiveness toward them. The relationship of extenuating circumstances to forgiveness is explored in the next chapter.

FORGIVENESS AND EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES

If we could read the secret history of our enemies, we should find in each person's life sorrow and suffering enough to disarm all hostility.

– Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

We have all been harmed, just as we have all at times harmed ourselves and others.

– Jack Kornfield

Extenuating circumstances are outside factors, beyond the control of individuals, that influence and mold their behavior and character. A consideration of our parents' extenuating circumstances sometimes awakens feelings of forgiveness, although, once again, we must be careful not to do this as a way of denying or minimizing our own painful past.

Many of us consider our parents' hardships and misfortunes prematurely in order to bypass or short-circuit our grieving process. This often results in a premature decision to forgive which in turn leaves us developmentally arrested – still suffering from our childhood deficits. When we dismiss our own pain by elevating our parents' pain above it, we are exchanging our future potential to become more whole and alive human beings for a false, empty notion of forgiveness.

I believe it is wise to wait until we have attained at least a modicum of self-compassion before we focus too much on our parents' extenuating circumstances. Sympathy for our parents' suffering is usually part of the process of denial if it is not matched with at least some self-compassion.

Nonetheless, with this warning in mind, the potential to feel forgiveness often does relate to an emotionally-based understanding of how our parents got to be the way they were. Most were, in fact, victims of terrible childhoods, and their most cogent extenuating circumstances are that they too were grossly neglected or seriously abused.

OUR PARENTS' UNCRIED TEARS BECAME THEIR RAGE

When inward life dries up, when feeling decreases and apathy increases, when one cannot affect or even genuinely touch another person, violence flares up as a daemonic necessity for contact, a mad drive forcing touch in the most direct way possible.

– Rollo May

Many of our parents were physically abused as children and not allowed to release their pain through crying. Many came to over-rely on angering as their only means of releasing emotional pain. No amount of angering or raging, however, can serve the releasing function of tears. In fact, rage in the place of tears only begets more rage, for it exacerbates the loneliness and isolation of the perpetrator.

There is actually some truth in the sickening expression: “This hurts me more than it hurts you,” for our parents’ abusiveness also injured them. Their mistreatment of us diminished or destroyed our capacity to have authentic loving feelings for them.

Many of us, then, are indirectly the victims of social pressures that forced our parents to repress their pain until it accumulated and transmuted into rage. The *pain-into-rage syndrome* is rife in our society, and is customarily passed down from generation to generation. It has created great gulfs of unwept tears and huge chasms of enmity between the generations.

We live in a culture where there is so little true sympathy between parents and children that there are probably few readers who cannot poignantly remember thinking they were adopted orphans, or given to the wrong parents when taken out of the hospital nursery. Did you ever fantasize when you were young about the redemptory return of your “real” parents who would surely be more loving and appreciative than those adults who were posing as your mom and dad? William Stafford wrote poignantly about this notion:

*If you were exchanged in the cradle and
your real mother died
without ever telling the story
then no one knows your name . . .
“Who are you really, wanderer?” –
and the answer you have to give
no matter how dark and cold
the world around you is:
“Maybe I’m a king.”*

No wonder so many older parents are banished from the extended family into old-age homes. Nowhere but in Western society is there a necessity for these loveless institutions. Might it be in some instances that we are unconsciously jailing our elders in retribution for their unrepentant abuse?

FORGIVING OUR PARENTS

Nonetheless, the fact that most parents were poorly parented themselves is a compelling extenuating circumstance. Many actually did do the best they could given what they knew and where they came from. Many were merely imitating the punitive practices of their own parents. Many were simply following the “wisdom” of the times: “Spare the rod and spoil the child”; “Children should be seen and not heard.”

With such understanding in mind, and with sufficient grieving of our own childhood losses, we can sometimes open our hearts to the common hurt we share with our parents. They too were children once – children whose self-esteem and confidence were shattered by parental shaming and intimidation. They too had their expressiveness truncated by disinterest and neglect. They too exited childhood with huge caverns of emptiness in their hearts and souls, never having been fed by and filled with the emotional love of another.

The parental oppression they endured became the model they imitated when they abused and neglected us. As we increasingly comprehend how poorly our parents were parented, many of us eventually experience a sense of compassion for their losses. Sometimes this compassion awakens a bodily-felt sense in us that expands into feelings of forgiveness.

A *bodily-felt sense* is a profound knowing and unshakable certainty that resonates throughout the body with intense feeling and sensation. When it is particularly intense it may be accompanied by tingling, chills, flushes, goose bumps, or an outpouring of emotion. Sometimes a bodily-felt sense produces an expansive feeling in the heart that spills over with tears and/or laughter of sweet relief. A bodily-felt sense is the kind of experience that can make us exclaim excitedly, “I get it!” In the moment of “getting it” we are able to make sense of and accept anything that we are struggling to come to terms with.

In my own experience, I will never forget the lonely Christmas Eve that I “got” my first profound understanding and bodily-felt sense of my mother’s extenuating circumstances. Meditating on my extended family, I began to visualize what it must have been like for her growing up with my volatile, schizophrenic grandfather and her two tough older brothers, who later became hard-core New York cops. I suddenly wept as I recalled a photograph of her as a child in which she looked terrified.

When my tears subsided I felt rage and anger quicken in my heart as I realized how abusive her family must have been to create that terrified look on her face and that fearful contraction in her body. Once my rage was spent, I pondered her circumstances more deeply and suddenly felt certain then that she’d been sexually abused. (Each of my three sisters in later years confided separately to me their strong suspicions that she must have been “incested” by my uncles or grandfather.)

New waves of grief suffused me. I felt as though I was grieving for both her abuse and the heretofore unseen roots of my own abuse. This storm of grief then culminated when a glorious feeling of forgiveness for her billowed up inside my heart and radiated out throughout my body.

Later on this feeling of forgiveness dissipated, and I found myself contemplating my grandfather’s beginnings. I remembered that he had been raised in an orphanage in Scotland. Informed by my sociological studies, I recalled the Dickensian horrors that typically befell small children in British welfare institutions. I felt waves of sadness and anger about the sexual and physical abuse I was certain he must have suffered to have degenerated into paranoid

schizophrenia.

As these feelings ran their course, I began to feel rage at his abandoning mother, my great-grandmother, who had left him as a defenseless infant on the steps of an orphanage. I grieved deeply for him and for the him in me, and then once again felt the wonder of forgiveness welling up in my heart for him.

Somewhat later, I moved into an even deeper revelation of the antecedents of my own abuse and losses. I surmised that my great-grandmother must also have been the victim of very difficult circumstances. She must have suffered a terrible tragedy to make her give up her baby in that way. She appeared in my imagination as a poor, unmarried country girl who had been “taken advantage of.” I shuddered and cried with empathy at her dilemma for I knew that, in those times, unmarried mothers who produced “bastards” were despised outcasts and scapegoats.

I spent many hours that night alternately weeping for and angering at the unfairness that had befallen my ancestors, and by extension, myself. I psychically traveled back through the generations, looking with rage for the original perpetrator to blame for my family’s pain. Yet, with the puzzle pieces of known family history, sociological understanding, and intuitive insights, I continuously understood that each perpetrator had originally been someone else’s victim, and was merely reenacting his or her own abuse on someone else.

THE EMOTIONAL AND SPIRITUAL CARNAGE OF THE INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION

People whose course of life has reached a crisis must confront their collective past as fully as a neurotic patient must unbind his personal past: long-forgotten traumas in history may have a disastrous effect upon millions who remain unaware of them.

– Lewis Mumford

In tracing my heritage of abuse and neglect, I intuitively lamented my way through many long-forgotten generations on that lonely Christmas Eve, until I came to what still strikes me as the origin of our terrible epidemic of dysfunctional parenting. In a lucid, movie-like viewing, I saw with my mind’s eye families ravaged en masse by the Industrial Revolution. (This destruction is trenchantly depicted in D.H. Lawrence’s novel *The Rainbow*.)

I saw men taken away from wholistic lifestyles in which their families worked harmoniously together to provide for all their needs. I saw them placed in sterile, mindless, repetitive jobs in coal mines and factories, where they lost their sense of purpose, and where the light of their spirits was systematically extinguished.

My heart ached as I saw these men driven to perform as faultlessly and emotionlessly as machines. Eventually, they began acting like machines, with no social intercourse, no tolerance of mistakes, and no time for anything that was not “productive.”

Years later, while watching a documentary on Henry Ford’s factories, I saw that workers there were not allowed to talk or sing, or wander more than five feet from their stations on the assembly line. The strongest, youngest, most efficient workers were routinely put at the front of the assembly line. Those who could not keep up were fired, and most men were “used up” before

they reached forty, only to be discarded onto the streets where there were no welfare institutions to support them.

Little wonder so many of our forefathers became chronically depressed, embittered, and addicted to alcoholically numbing away their pain. It doesn't take much imagination to visualize them coming home from work expecting their families to behave in the same uncomplaining, noninteractive way that the factory required of them.

Treated like machines, our forefathers in turn treated their children like machines, and machines are only useful when they are operating efficiently. The most valued machines require little attention, rarely break down, and are economically fueled. Little wonder that children began to be treated mechanistically, and that good parenting on the part of the father was reduced to putting food (fuel) on the table. Little wonder that the needs of children were often treated as bothersome and annoying as the breakdown of a factory machine. Little wonder that perfectionism invaded the psyches of these children.

The mechanization of our forefathers produced the prototypes of the modern day "absent father" and "silent armchair daddy." Great is the number of adult children who have never played a game with their father or ever heard a tender word from him. I'm sure that if research was done, we would see a very high correlation between the incidence of family dysfunction, and the degree of meaninglessness and automation in parents' work lives.

When people are treated like machines, they become heartless and soulless. They lose touch with the natural human sense of empathy that normally serves to warn them when they are treating others abusively or neglectfully. The epidemic of child abuse and child neglect in this country is denied and tolerated because of this lack of empathy.

The soul-destroying mechanization of people that began in the Industrial Revolution is still rampant today. Children are turned into tiny learning machines at earlier and earlier ages. A recent PBS special *Running Out Of Time* showed footage of summer camps where three-year-olds spend eight hours a day mastering computers! And many workers are besieged as ever by pressures to become increasingly robotic. This occurs not only in traditional factories but also in offices – modern factories of sterile paperwork and information overload. *Running Out Of Time* reported that twenty-six million Americans are currently monitored by the machines they work on. These machines assault them with signals whenever they are working slower than their neighboring operators.

This contrasts with the work habits of rain forest societies. A recent anthropological study discovered that these societies are able to meet all their survival needs with each member working two to three hours a day.

Many of our most popular leisure activities are becoming as soul-destroying as our jobs. (I find it interesting that leisure activities are commonly referred to as pastimes, as if free time were some burden to pass through or get past, rather than enjoy.)

More and more of us are spending increasing amounts of our off-work hours entranced by solitary and sedentary diversions such as television, home computers, Internet, and video games. Virtual reality technology threatens to make real reality increasingly unpopular. I have read a number of newspaper reports that claim the average American watches television over six hours a day! Such spirit-dulling "activity" erodes our vitality and dissolves our capacity for communication and human-interactive entertainment.

Even worse, television and video games are commonly used as inexpensive baby-sitters. Television has become the modern version of the wire monkey that Harlowe used as a surrogate

mother. Tranced out in living rooms everywhere, American families wither in the cold cathode-ray glow of homes that have become communication deserts. Such socially-approved numbing propagates and exacerbates our culture's epidemic of verbal, spiritual, and emotional neglect.

What a sad contrast this is to the vignettes of family life that I have witnessed in many less-industrialized countries. Even families barely surviving on the streets of Calcutta seemed more spiritually and emotionally alive and healthy than most Western families of vastly greater means. I was often struck while I lived there by the amount of tenderness, warmth, and interactive-ness in their daily lives with each other. I also frequently felt wonder at the playfulness and overt affection of both fathers and mothers with their children.

Most startling of all for me, however, was my experience of actually feeling envious of the warmth and love in these families. This love was as striking and palpable as a spring garden suddenly replete with bloom. It was more real and substantive than anything I had observed in any American family I knew. These families, along with others whose homes I visited in Thailand, Bali, and Morocco were far more nurturing and relaxed than the most glamorized idealizations of the American family that I have seen on stage or screen. When a culture is as emotionally impoverished as ours, it even fails at creating believable illusions of familial love.

The pressures of life in industrialized societies force us to live at a harried pace to keep up with the complex demands of modern living. Many modern families cannot survive without both parents working, and many of these parents are constantly overwhelmed with stress and fatigue. In such conditions, parents who truly intend to love and care for their children often unconsciously slip into recreating the abandoning, shaming, and punishing conditions of their own childhoods – many times even when they have sworn to raise their children differently than their parents.

Yet the human spirit is amazingly resilient, and I have met numerous survivor-parents, some with sparse personal recovery, who are remarkably loving and nurturing to their children. Many have been aided in this accomplishment by the proliferation of knowledge and resources about healthy child-rearing practices that has become available in America in the last two decades. I also happily know many parents whose dedication to their own recovery has aided them to raise their children so healthily that I sometimes feel as envious around their families as I did visiting the families mentioned above.

THE IMAGINATIVE RECONSTRUCTION OF OUR PARENTS' CHILDHOODS

Forgiveness means going into your heart so that you can feel the pain of another and let go of it.

– Stephen Levine

You can enhance your appreciation of your parents' extenuating circumstances by imagining what their childhoods were like in as much detail as possible. Reading historical accounts and watching documentaries of the times of their childhood can help with this. Eliciting a family history from your parents or older extended family members also helps. Perusing family photo albums is usually a very rich source of information. You may experience some particularly enlightening insights by studying photos of your parents and grandparents as children.

I always feel excited when my clients bring in historical photos of themselves and their families. These photos often contain trenchant evidence of miserable childhoods subtly or blatantly displayed in the body language and facial expressions of family members. (It is important to note that photos do not always portray the past accurately. Many dysfunctional parents shame and coerce their children into smiling for the camera.)

Old family photos have triggered in me many profound experiences of understanding and compassion for my parents. Along with the picture of my mother appearing terrified as a child, I also have a photo of my father as a ten-year-old that still occasionally makes me cry. In it, he looks like a wizened adult – like a combat veteran who has never played or enjoyed a day of his life. And no wonder, at that tender age he is already the man of the house – raising two younger siblings, nursing a mother bedridden with depression, and replacing a father often gone on long alcoholic binges.

I also have a photo of my great-grandfather who looks so thoroughly mean and nasty that I sometimes get chills of fear looking at it. Sometimes it singlehandedly explains to me the rage-aholism of my grandfather and father.

And I have two pictures of me as a two-year-old in which my hands are so swollen that they appear knuckle-less. I am still not sure of the cause of the painful-looking swelling, but I can tell by my facial expression in the pictures and by the feeling in my body when I look at these photos that it was something very traumatic.

The imaginative reconstruction of our parents' childhoods sometimes stimulates us to grieve for their losses. We may experience a very profound healing by letting ourselves cry for them, and by allowing ourselves to feel angry about how their parents hurt them. This is sometimes difficult to do because many of us had grandparents who were kind to us in a way they never were with our parents. Ironically, this sometimes hurt us more than it helped us, for many of our parents reacted with punitive envy when they saw their parents giving us the kindness they never received. As I "midwifed" my mother's dying, she was at one point wracked in grief as she finally expressed the pain she had felt seeing her mother offer me the tenderness that she had been perpetually deprived of.

Most of us hold a part of our parents' grief about their childhood abandonment. When we mournfully protest our mom and dad's unfair suffering, we are also championing the us in them that lost so much because of grandma and grandpa's poor parenting. When we grieve deeply for our parents, this feeling of sorrow for them sometimes expands into genuine feelings of forgiveness.

GOD: THE ULTIMATE EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCE

Who is responsible for these sins? In the final analysis it is God who created the world and its sins.

– Carl Jung

An ever-deepening understanding of extenuating circumstances continues to help me feel more and more compassion and forgiveness for my own ancestors, as well as for the vast majority of dysfunctional parents I witness today. And, although I do not really know who to

blame for the Industrial Revolution, I find that it often helps me when I blame God for its decimation of love in our culture.

It does not make sense to me that we should only praise God for blessings and then reserve all the blame for life's disappointments for ourselves. In his enlightening book, *God Our Loving Enemy*, Rev. Robert McClelland explores the benefits of allowing our healthy feelings of blame toward God. He cites many passages from the Bible that alleviate guilt and give us permission to feel angry at God about life's many unfairnesses.

I sometimes feel great rage and blame toward God, the apparent all-powerful creator of everything, for creating or allowing the development of a system that has turned so many people into callous, deadened machines. Ironically, this blaming invariably deepens my gratitude to God, who seemingly forsook us in our childhood years, yet at the same time created abundant beauty, wonder, and love for us to discover in our adult years.

In blaming God, we make the strongest statement possible about our childhood innocence. This is merely an extension of what we do when we anger at parental unfairness and protest our childhood victimization. Healthy blame, as was seen in [Chapter 7](#), is our invaluable instinct of refusing to accept shame for problems not of our own making. It is, therefore, normal and healthy for us to occasionally perceive God as the ultimate dysfunctional parent. Even Jesus blamed God, his father, when he cried out on the cross: "Why hast thou forsaken me?"

We also benefit from blaming God for wider unfairnesses and injustices. It is powerfully restorative to hate and rage at such large-scale abuses as war, disease, famine, and poverty. The horror of such tragedies sometimes weigh heavily on our hearts. Grieving is a healthy way of relieving this weight. As a complement to the compassionate tears we sometimes shed for others, we also need to vent our anger at the despicable tragedies that afflict our human family.

And although many argue that it doesn't change anything to get upset about things outside of our control, we can often change the depression and hopelessness we feel in response to great calamities. The processes of grieving help us to rebirth the faith and hope in life that sometimes dies in close encounters with such painful realities.

When we allow ourselves occasional experiences of blaming God, we can resolve our normal angry feelings at the divine in a way that then allows us to "forgive" God, to reopen to divine love, and to feel gratitude for the unsurpassable gift of being incarnated in a human body.

UNDERSTANDING EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES ASSUAGES SHAME

There is another benefit that comes from trying to picture the conditions that contributed to our parents' abusiveness. Sometimes such reckoning enables us to see that what was done to us was often highly impersonal. This notion is reflected by Hugh Missildine's statement: "If the person you most admired had been born to the same parents, he would have been treated the same way."

Our parents' mistreatment of us was not a response to some essential flaw or badness in us, but rather another awful example of how human beings ignorantly repeat the past when they haven't learned from it. Even if we had been supernaturally perfect in every way, we would still have suffered from our parents' blind replays of their own childhood tragedies.

What was done to us was often an unintentional manifestation of repetition compulsion.

Our parents unconsciously repeated the same abuses as their parents because they were usually in as much denial and defended-ness as we were before we began recovery work. Most parents, who have not been enlightened by a recovery perspective, have little awareness of how neglectful or abusive they were or are. Many of them have never even realized that they themselves were injured by the parenting practices they so ignorantly mimicked.

I have heard many adults from my parents' generation say things like: "My father used to beat me black-and-blue but it was good for me; it made a man out of me!" "My mother made me go to work when I was six. She never coddled me and I'm glad of it because otherwise I would have been too soft to make it." "My father never paid any attention to me, thank God, or I would have been spoiled like all these kids today."

I would also bet that my father saw himself as a much better parent than his father. When he hit me, it was "only" with an open hand; and, unlike his father, he came home sober every night. These parenting "improvements" of his, however, did little to change the fundamental legacy of my family's abusive parenting. Frequent explosions of his hair-trigger temper terrified me and shut me down in the same way that his father's drunken rages shrank him into a tiny corner of his being.

Because our parents had many aspects of their self-expression shamed or punished out of them, they came to hate and censor these aspects of themselves, and hence did the same with us. Because many of their essential needs were ignored, so were many of ours. Because they did not discover and grieve their own losses, they did not know how much they were depriving us.

How cruelly ironic that our parents' bitterness was often aimed at our healthy inborn human expressiveness rather than anything that was essentially wrong with us. The sight of our vital expressiveness unconsciously filled them with pain as it reminded them of all their missing self-expression. This was sometimes the source of the infamous "Get out of my sight – I can't stand looking at you."

When parents are unable to use their children as models and inspirations to recover their own aliveness, they sometimes kill their children's spiritedness in the same way that it was killed in them. Such parents become intensely upset when their children are boisterous and jubilant. They cannot bear the reflection of this wondrous lost part of themselves. For much the same reason, dysfunctional parents are commonly rankled by many other aspects of their children's still-intact, healthy emotional expression.

With this kind of understanding, we can realize that there was nothing about who we were that deserved depreciation. The rage that was directed at us frequently had very little to do with us. The lack of love we experienced was not because of a lack of merit on our part, but because of our parents' lost ability to love.

THE LIMITS OF FORGIVENESS EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES ARE SOMETIMES IRRELEVANT

Perhaps for some great pains you may not feel a release, but only the burden of the anguish or anger you have held. Touch this softly. Be forgiving of yourself in this as well. Forgiveness cannot be forced; it cannot be artificial.

– Jack Kornfield

Extenuating circumstances are not related to forgiveness in an all-or-none way. Some parents' extenuating circumstances are more compelling than others. Some survived very difficult childhoods and made monumental leaps in decreasing their family legacies of abuse and neglect. Others, with significantly less childhood trauma of their own, devolved into even deeper extremes of poor parenting. (Drug and alcohol abuse commonly played a part in this.) Still others may have parented so unconscionably that forgiveness is not an option, no matter how dramatic their extenuating circumstances.

Aiming for forgiveness through the consideration of extenuating circumstances is, therefore, not appropriate for every survivor, and may even be counter-therapeutic for some. Adult children of parents who were sociopathic and took pleasure in being abusive are extremely unlikely to attain feelings of forgiveness toward them.

Adult children of intentionally cruel parents need to understand that there is no known cure or effective treatment for sociopathy. Sociopaths are devoid of conscience and empathy. Many are addicted to hurting others. If our parents were sociopathic, we owe it to ourselves to separate from them in every way.

The same is often true of parents who were not sociopathic but who behaved in ways that were severely damaging to us. Some dysfunctional families produce as many abusers as they do victims. Not all survivors become codependent caretakers or doormats. If our parents completely "identified with the aggressor," they may have become adults who habitually reenacted the crimes of their parents. Many of us are victims of parents who were addicted to using anger, sarcasm, criticism, and teasing to release their unresolved emotional pain.

Habitual hurtfulness is so severely wounding that forgiveness is sometimes simply not possible. It is unfair to expect ourselves to feel compassion for parents who were nothing but a

source of pain. Our healthy inability to forgive scapegoating parents may leave us perpetually imprisoned in shame if we cling to the belief that we must forgive them.

Those who try to “guilt trip” survivors of intense trauma into “choosing” forgiveness are also abusing them. It is as heartless to shame a severely abused adult child into forgiving her parents as it is to pressure a Holocaust survivor into forgiving Hitler. It is nonsense to say that survivors won’t get anywhere in recovery (or therapy) until they start forgiving. For many, the opposite is true. They won’t get anywhere in recovery until they start allowing themselves the experience of healthy blame.

Some of us have no choice but to experience a horribly abusive perpetrator as unforgivable. This does not have to affect our ability to forgive others or ourselves. Forgiveness is not an all-or-none experience. We can recover and evolve in a way that allows us frequent and easy access to forgiving feelings in our daily lives without ever forgiving a monstrously abusive parent.

In no way is it necessary to feel forgiveness for our parents in order to heal the wounds of past abuse. While feelings of forgiveness are a delight to the soul, many survivors continue to make ongoing progress in their recovery without any feelings of forgiveness for their abusers. The more a survivor practices grieving the losses of childhood and self-compassionate reparenting, the more s/he will recover.

Finally, miraculous moments of feeling true forgiveness can sometimes occur in even the worst cases of abuse, but they are the exception and not the rule.

THE ONGOING DANCE OF FORGIVENESS AND BLAME

*Indeed, I cannot tell,
Though I ponder on it well,
Which were easier to state
All my love or all my hate . . .
My dear friend, I love thee still.
It were treason to our love,
And a sin to God above,
One iota to abate
Of a pure impartial hate.*

– Henry David Thoreau

Premature forgiveness often concretizes denial by devolving into a false permanent forgiveness that I call *fossilized forgiveness*. Fossilized forgiveness typically occurs when we decide we have focused enough on the past and should move on to permanent, unqualified forgiveness. This decision is frequently triggered by shame and guilt. Someone tells us we have been “crying over spilt milk” and over-obsessing about the past. Fossilized forgiveness is our attempt to atone for our guilt by once and for all banishing the subject of our family’s dysfunctionality from our awareness.

Fossilized forgiveness is also commonly triggered by fear. We panic in the belief that our grieving is too intense and too interminable. We conclude that we will never get to the bottom of

our grief, and we try to permanently seal the door to the past by declaring our parents forgiven. When we do this, we risk bypassing our most injurious childhood traumas for they are usually the last to surface. Unfortunately, the greatest contraction and limitation in our lives is caused by our most grievous, unresolved wounds.

When feelings of forgiveness are realizable in cases of severe abuse, they are usually fleeting as few of us recover completely from the damage of long-term abuse. Although extensive grieving has brought me a great amount of healing, I still occasionally struggle with the aftereffects of years of being battered. Hence, while I have had many experiences of authentic forgiveness for my parents, I cannot feel forgiving toward them during an emotional flashback.

My parents' physical abuse was so intense and ongoing that I may always have a degree of social hypervigilance, an occasional startle response, and an initial fear and distrust of unknown authority figures. (While some may argue that accepting limitations only entrenches them, I believe that pretending they don't exist makes them trenches that we blindly and continuously stumble into.)

To resolve these flashbacks, I need to blame my parents, not myself, as the source of my social apprehension. Blaming them for these flashbacks helps reassure the child in me that he is no longer imprisoned in the past. He is now under my protection and safe and welcome to fully participate.

I have used this healthy process of blame internally, in the privacy of my own mind, many times to resolve these difficult intrusions from the past. Typically, this then makes it possible for me to be fully present and expressive in social situations. However, if I forget to rescue myself in this way, I typically fall back into old defensive postures, such as withdrawing, disguising myself in silence or overcompensating with false bravado.

My journey towards full self-expressiveness will probably be lifelong, as will be the usefulness of this type of blame. In my early years of recovery, blame was a well-used tool. Over the later years, my flashbacks have steadily decreased as has my reliance on blame as a resolution for them. Nevertheless, if and when my inner critical parents arise to try to knock me down again, I will momentarily need to abandon all notions of forgiveness, and blame these awful parental specters. (Let me also remind you of two other equally important tools in working through flashbacks: loving yourself and purely feeling your body's experience while they are occurring.)

DEGREES OF FORGIVENESS

The degree, duration, and combination of abuse and neglect varies greatly in each dysfunctional family. Accordingly, the intensity and duration of grieving that precedes the emergence of forgiving feelings will vary considerably from individual to individual.

If we fail to grasp this, we are prone to shamefully comparing ourselves to others who seem to have an easier time with forgiveness. Comparison is one of the most insidious demons of toxic shame. I meet many survivors who continuously flagellate themselves with the irrelevant and unfair judgment that they are less forgiving than others.

Experiences of feeling forgiveness vary greatly in frequency, intensity, and duration. This

is as true from individual to individual as it is for a single individual over time. Sometimes I am filled with love and compassion when remembering my mother; sometimes I experience painful emotional flashbacks of abandonment and hurt when I remember her; and sometimes I experience a vacillation between gratitude and hurt when remembering what it was like having her for a mother. There is little predictability about how forgiving I will feel when considering my mother because forgiveness, like all essentially emotional experiences, is often mercurial.

FORGIVENESS FROM A DISTANCE

Forgiveness does not mean you have to seek out or speak to those who caused you harm. You may choose never to see them again.

– Jack Kornfield

Some of us achieve enough resolution of the past that we are able to feel safe and easy around our formerly-abusive parents. Our experience of forgiveness is so profound that we may even be able to achieve authentic intimacy with them.

Others of us, however, are only able to feel forgiveness for our parents from a distance. Thus, while our grief work may bring us powerful feelings of forgiveness, it may still be impossible to feel relaxed and safe around our parents. There are at least three conditions that cause this.

Firstly, our parents continue to treat us with a lack of respect, and this makes trust and openness impossible in their presence. This is true whether or not we are in denial about their ongoing abusiveness.

Secondly, our parents are no longer abusive but we still feel deep trepidation around them because they have expressed no remorse about their past hurtfulness. This often leaves us unconsciously contracted in fear that their rage will suddenly reawaken and scourge us.

Thirdly, our parents are no longer actively abusive, but their self-centeredness and lack of genuine interest in us makes us feel as hurt and alienated as we did in childhood.

Forgiving feelings cannot arise in the face of abuse because fear automatically drives us out of heart-centeredness into hypervigilance or dissociation. Few of us can keep from automatically contracting in fear in the face of ongoing hostility – even if the hostility is “only” verbal. Nonetheless, our emotional natures are prodigiously flexible and many of us are still able to feel real compassion for our parents once we are out of range of their abuse.

When we are safe from being hurt, some of us can feel forgiveness for almost anyone. From a distance, I sometimes feel forgiveness for society’s most heinous criminals. Studies indicate that most prison inmates are the progeny of severely disturbed families. Their upbringing clearly pushes them in the direction of becoming violently sociopathic. When I imagine the intensity of the childhood abuse they are imitating and repeating, I feel compassion for these poor lost and loveless souls. I want to forgive and heal the little children in them who have been forced to reenact the violence of their parents.

Yet such experiences of feeling forgiveness do not mean that I would want to be in a dark alley with any of them. Nor does it mean that I think they should be free to roam the streets where they would re-perpetrate violent acts. And, of course, it does not mean that I forgive any

of their acts of violence. Yet how I wish these poor souls could be relieved of the horrible pain that makes their own loving natures so inaccessible to them.

REAL FEELINGS OF FORGIVENESS MAY RECRYSTALLIZE DENIAL

*. . . We can so easily slip back from what we have struggled to attain,
abruptly into a life we never wanted; can find that we are trapped, as
in a dream, and die there, without ever waking up.*

– Rilke

Genuine feelings of forgiveness for a still-abusive parent can be dangerous to the recoveree. It is often tempting to interpret such feelings as a clean bill of health for the whole relationship. I frequently see the destructive results of this with my clients. Somewhat bedazzled by the genuine feelings of compassion and forgiveness achieved through grieving, they hope and often believe that their parents will display a similar tenderness during their next contact. A sometimes desperate desire for this re-potentiizes their denial into fossilized forgiveness, and all the old defenses against feeling the pain of parental dysfunctionality are reinstated.

My heart often aches when I see these clients after subsequent parental contact. They sometimes report a wonderful, loving interaction, yet visibly display signs of upset. If they have had extended contact, they often appear constricted, exhausted, and deadened. They may have caught colds, developed back problems, or experienced migraines, insomnia or nightmares. They commonly look as if they have regressed back into the shamed and depressed children they were forced to be while growing up in their families.

When parents have only become less blatantly abusive, the combination of forgiving feelings and gratitude for their small improvements masks less obvious, present-time hurtfulness. This is especially true with parents who are no longer physically abusive but are still verbally toxic.

The recrystallization of denial is even more likely when parents are no longer hostile in any way, but are still essentially indifferent. Tidbits of apparent interest from them can easily reinstate the illusory belief that Mom and Dad really do care after all. However, when their token gestures of caring are unsubstantiated by authentic or consistent interest, our old wounds of shame and abandonment usually reopen painfully.

When forgiving feelings recrystallize denial, visits home can temporarily erase the benefits of months, even years, of self-esteem work. In some cases I have seen very dramatic instances of this from a mere five-minute phone call with a still-dysfunctional parent.

There is another danger with forgiveness at a distance. We tend to hold ourselves wholly responsible for how awful we feel after visiting our unchanged parents. I have heard many forms of the following self-excoriation at such times:

I really am bad. They really can't help it. They're not trying to hurt me, and they're not nearly as bad as they used to be. Why can't I try a little harder? If only I weren't so needy and oversensitive. I'm just too

messed up to get anywhere in this work. Why can't I get over my "stuff" and just try to be more forgiving?

These survivors may even go on to mock past experiences of genuine recovery and forgiveness as phony and worthless – as even more proof that they “can’t do anything right.” In a reasoning process contaminated by toxic shame, they may conclude:

If I were really forgiving – if I would finally make up my mind to just get over the past and truly forgive my parents – then I could have a decent visit with them. If only I hadn't acted like such a spoiled brat and expected so much from them!

So it is when we try to permanently hold on to forgiving feelings. Legitimate upsets from parental hurtfulness flash us back into the childhood role of taking complete blame for every upset that occurs between us and our parents.

FORGIVENESS CAN MASK EMOTIONAL EXPLOITATION

People are forgivable; blameworthy behaviors remain perpetually blameworthy.

– Herbie Monroe

Unfortunately, forgiving feelings for our parents, no matter how profound and authentic, do not create automatic shifts in their capacity or willingness to be loving and nurturing. This is often the case with the kind of dysfunctional parents who pressured us into taking care of them. Fossilized forgiveness leaves many of us ignorant of how we were “parentified” and pumped for love, and left to expect little or nothing in return.

Many dysfunctional parents are stuck in an infantile and over-needy stage of their emotional development. They are extremely reluctant to give up the role of being the special one. Some let go of their old abusive ways, but continue to demand the spotlight of the adult child's attention.

Here is my experience of this. My father came to visit me on two different occasions immediately after spending a week with my sister's children. Even though he is no longer abusive, his visits racked my abandonment wounds in a dual way. Not only was he generally oblivious to my concerns, but he also continuously drew blanks when I asked him about my nephew and niece. Although they are the only grandchildren he is allowed to visit, he knew almost nothing about them or their interests.

When our parents interact so narcissistically with us, they add salt to our old abandonment wounds. How could it be otherwise when every “one-way” adult relationship is hurtful to the one who always gives and rarely receives?

Yet, contact with the still-dysfunctional family is not necessarily valueless. When it is

experienced from a perspective of recovery, it helps reduce denial and validate our pain and concern about our losses. This is particularly true in families where parents remain much the same as they were during the survivor's childhood. To clients experienced in recovery, I sometimes frame visits "home" as "fact-finding tours."

Such visits can also serve recovery by bringing up old unresolved pain that might not otherwise be made available for release. Visits home are therefore useful whether or not there is any real healing in our present relationship with our parents.

There is, of course, a limit to the usefulness of painful visits home. Excessive contact with families that are still abusive or severely neglectful are sometimes nothing more than surrendering to further abuse. This type of unworked-through repetition compulsion usually retards recovery more than it aids it.

A PERSONAL STORY ABOUT FORGIVENESS FROM A DISTANCE

In my own slow learning around this issue, I am still sometimes shocked by the emotional flashbacks of fear and shame that I experience in the week that precedes visits with my father. I am further shocked by how long it takes me to recover from a mere forty-eight hour visit with him.

As many times as I have cried about the awful circumstances of his life, and as many times as I have raged at his past abuses and realized that I could easily repel him if he ever attacked me again, I still cannot relax around him. As "irrational" as it may be, there is nothing that elicits more ongoing fear and shame in me than the time around one of his visits.

And even though I clearly understand why the child in me is still afraid of him, I am still taken aback that my many experiences of feeling forgiving toward him have not allowed me to enjoy his company. In fact, when I have not seen him for a considerable amount of time, I begin to believe that his next visit will be really different. My ongoing experiences of feeling forgiveness seem to convince me that we are now ready for a relaxed and intimate relationship, and that he will finally be able to show me warm, fatherly interest. The longer the time between visits, the more I am susceptible to this. Time appears to be an ally of denial, and I have seen many instances besides my own where it allows the childhood illusion of being loved to recrystallize.

Repeated experiences of denial around my father's visits only deepens my awe of the need of the psyche to create the illusion of being loved. The need for a parent's love is so crucial in childhood that the psyche can create a formidable and enduring illusion of it without a shred of real evidence.

To this day I can only remember two brief occasions when my father was kind to me as a child, yet I idolized him and fervently wanted to follow in his footsteps. I was sure until I was twelve that I would go into the navy and then into an engineering career as he had. Without ever hearing it from him, I believed he loved me, especially since my mother insisted that he did. My need to believe this allowed me to cancel out overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Perhaps the most cogent evidence was that I was perpetually anxious and afraid whenever I was within arm's length of him, hypervigilantly anticipating his next verbal or physical blow. I can even now feel the incredible sense of relief that I would experience on those blessed

occasions when he fell asleep on the couch and was temporarily disarmed. Even more blessed was when he had to work late and was not at the dinner table. Absolute deliverance occurred on those rare occasions when he would be gone on a work project for a few days.

Yet even with all this understanding, my inner critical parent still occasionally manages to shame me into believing that everything would be just fine between us if I would just get over the past once and for all. Inner glowerings of toxic shame insist I am nothing but an ingrate for not rejoicing at my father's new mellowness. After all, he no longer hits me, criticizes me, or glances at me with disgust. I should forget this nonsense about dogs never getting over being terrified of their abusers when they have been abused by them for even just a few weeks as puppies. After all, shouldn't I have evolved beyond animal sensibility by now?

How hard it is at times to resist the siren-like call of toxic shame! Yet I must continue to use healthy blame to champion myself when shame tries to convince me that our lack of intimacy is my fault. I must use it whenever necessary to remind myself of the constancy and duration of my father's past hatred of me. Fear of my father may be imprinted in my psyche with the permanence of an instinct. How could it not be, after sitting next to him in petrifying fear for thousands of meals throughout my childhood:

Ever-tightening and ever-shrinking
ever-awaiting the moment of volcanic impact,
feeling his tension mounting,
hearing the anger coagulating in his stertorous breathing,
seeing the veins in his neck beginning to bulge
his eyes narrowing
his arm cocking back . . .

As much as it hurts me to write this, we may never be close, especially since he can't or won't bring more healing to our relationship by expressing remorse about his former brutality. I wish I could find words eloquent enough to converse with him about the hurtful parts of the past. Unfortunately, past experience has shown me he can only talk about such things sardonically. On a recent visit he quipped: "I don't know why your sister won't see me, I wasn't any crueller to her than the rest of you!" My father's inability or unwillingness to acknowledge anything about his shortcomings as a parent makes it impossible for the kid in me to trust him. How can the child know for sure that the raging, terrifying giant inside my father is not just taking one long nap on the couch before waking up as the same old violent parent?

Nonetheless, with a growing capacity to hold ambivalence, I still frequently feel love and forgiveness toward him when I don't see or talk to him for a while. From a distance, I can actually feel quite fond and appreciative of him. I am thankful for his genetic contribution and for the relatively stable home he provided.

I also enjoy my father's letters, which are safe from his immediate presence. I absolutely wish the best for him, and I am genuinely delighted that he has managed to find some pleasure in life in his old age. Sometimes, I even feel compassionate enough to feel good about giving him the undiluted attention and mothering energy he so hungers for.

The lack of closeness with my father is an ongoing loss in my life that becomes more and

more tolerable with grieving, but our lack of intimacy will probably always hurt. When abuse is enduringly harsh, the damage done to intimacy in a relationship with a parent can be irreparable.

I pray that I will always have the patience to deal genuinely with this painful reality. I have colluded too much in the past with those who have pressured me into sweeping my emotions under the carpet of awareness. I know that such denied feelings will surely come back to haunt and hurt me – most likely in ways that will injure the real intimacy I am graced to have with friends and other family members. I pray that I am increasingly able to refuse to be shamed for not attaining an Elysian state of forgiveness that allows me to “just get over it.”

LIMITING CONTACT WITH STILL-DYSFUNCTIONAL PARENTS

Forgiveness from a distance is not an all-or-none issue. We may still want to see our parents occasionally even when they haven’t changed enough for us to feel safe or vulnerable with them. In such cases, we can arrange limited contact with them in ways that may even allow some genuine enjoyment. Decreasing the length and frequency of visits is usually the key to this. I have found that one-day visits with my father are much more tolerable than two-day visits.

Many of us also do better visiting our parents than having them visit us. When an unevolved parent is in your home, there are many more aspects of your lifestyle exposed to potential criticism or moody disapproval. I also prefer visiting my father at his home because I can usually ask him to have other relatives visit at the same time. I am fortunate in that I feel more relaxed with them, and this tends to dilute some of the tension I am likely to feel with him.

On the other hand, some survivors cannot even think of a visit to their parents’ home without becoming upset, particularly if it is the same house where they were traumatized as children. “Returning to the scene of the crime” frequently evokes painful and overwhelming flashbacks. For this reason, I routinely advise clients visiting their parents to give themselves permission to escape at any moment if they feel overwhelmed. If we don’t like how a visit is unfolding, we can walk out the door, find a phone, call a cab, go to a hotel, and return to our real home. Many clients have told me that just being reminded that they have such “adult” options is enough to make them feel significantly more relaxed in their visits home.

Finally, some of us are best advised to limit contact with our parents to the mail or telephone. And as above, we have the right to end a telephone call at any juncture, should our parents regress into communicating disrespectfully.

FORGIVENESS AND SPIRITUALITY

I have met several very clear beings, yet I don’t believe I’ve met anyone who is completely without anger.

– Stephen Levine

Powerful feelings of forgiveness sometimes accompany an inner experience of spirit. When our awareness is graced with an opening to the divine, we are often filled with a wondrous

energy of love, well-being, and understanding. This understanding sometimes unfolds into the daunting realization that we are sacredly interconnected with all beings and things in a divine underlying matrix of unity and perfection.

The all-encompassing feeling of love that typically accompanies such spiritual openings is so profound that it sometimes expands into feelings of unconditional love and compassion for all sentient beings (which by and large includes most dysfunctional parents). When this occurs, we sometimes experience a fleeting sense that everything is, and has always been, exactly as it should be. When we are in this supernal emotional state, we usually feel exceptionally forgiving.

However sublime this experience may be, our recovery suffers when we mistake a transpersonal experience of forgiveness for interpersonal forgiveness. Spiritual awakenings, as healing and wonderful as they are, do not magically create an authentic forgiveness of our real-life abusers. Spiritual forgiveness is not an alternative to the grieving that must precede authentic, interpersonal forgiveness.

There are, unfortunately, many high-minded souls who invoke ideals of love and forgiveness to keep their unresolved histories of hurt out of awareness. Some use meditation like medication and their spiritual quest is all too often over-motivated by the desire to escape the emotional realities of embodiment. Some therapists call this sophisticated form of dissociation a “flight into light.”

I mourn the years I lost pursuing permanent, pain-free enlightenment in the East. Desperately searching for a mystical panacea for my depression and anxiety, I numbed myself with meditation. It was not until I faced my grief many years later that I learned how to use meditation to help me embrace life rather than escape it. Spiritual techniques like vipassana meditation are excellent tools for aiding survivors to deal healthily with all aspects of themselves and their experience of life.

William James, the transcendentalist who is often considered the father of American psychology, was a strong proponent of dealing with the difficulties of life realistically. Describing the healthy individual, he said:

He can stand this Universe . . . He can still find a zest in it, not by “ostrich-like forgetfulness” but by pure inward willingness to face the world despite all the deterrent objects there.

Relationships between parents and adult children never heal when transpersonal forgiveness is used to ignore the fact that trust has not been effectively established through a thorough addressing of the past. If we do not actively work through our anger and blame, our spiritual practice merely leaves us stranded in a stagnant condition of insubstantial, fossilized forgiveness.

Moreover, as with any experience with substantial emotional content, holding on to transpersonal forgiveness beyond its natural tenure makes such spiritual openings less accessible in the future.

This is not to say there is no place for spiritual work in the attainment of forgiveness. Spiritual experiences can be great motivators, for they show us that forgiveness is possible and wonderful to experience.

As part of spiritual practice, prayers and meditations on love, compassion, and forgiveness can be quite helpful, as long as we do not trick ourselves into believing we are feeling something that we are not. As paradoxical as it may seem, we reduce our capacity to feel genuine love and compassion when we try to force forgiveness.

In this light, a balanced affirmation or prayer for promoting a healthy relationship with forgiveness might sound like this:

I pray that I may be graced with the cleansing waters of forgiveness. I pray that I may relate to forgiveness in a beneficial and non-grasping way. Let me know who to forgive and be with, who to forgive and avoid, and who I do not need to forgive. Let me learn to forgive others by becoming more forgiving of myself.

SEEKING FORGIVENESS FOR OUR OWN DYSFUNCTIONAL PARENTING

My heart goes out to those survivors who discover after the fact that they parented their own children in the same detrimental ways that they themselves were parented. These survivors display exceptional courage in choosing the path of recovery. They face the difficult dilemma of working through the grief of their own childhood trauma, while knowing they have contributed to similar hurt in their children.

The following six-step process is designed to help survivors make amends with their children so that genuine forgiveness may arise between them. We can also adapt these steps to seek the forgiveness of anyone we have hurt.

1. Identify and admit the unfairness of specific patterns of abusive and neglectful behavior.
2. Apologize and express sorrow at any hurt or loss that this behavior has caused.
3. Refer to extenuating circumstances that contributed to the unconscious repetition of abuse and neglect.
4. Make amends for the hurts and losses where appropriate and possible. (Some parents do this by paying for part or all of the adult child's therapy when feasible.)
5. Allow grown children to ventilate their feelings about the hurt in a nonabusive way.
6. Promise to try to behave more fairly in the future and to be open to feedback about possible regressions into old harmful ways of interacting.

A variety of obstacles may affect this process. One is that some adult children do not want to hear that their parents were harmful to them. Many are so attached to their denial that they will not listen to their parents' confessions and regrets. They may simply be unprepared and unwilling to hear that there was anything wrong with their childhoods. This is important to understand because few adult children reflect realistically on their childhoods before the age of thirty.

Notwithstanding, a remorseful parent can in most cases at least initiate the forgiveness

process. She can write a letter to her adult child using the first three steps from the list above. She can describe her perceptions of her adult child's childhood losses and apologize for her part in them.

If the letter is not well-received and her child does not want to hear any more about the matter, the parent has at least planted a seed for a recovery process that may germinate in later years. She has also unburdened herself of tacit or real family secrets.

A second obstacle to making amends for parenting mistakes is sometimes encountered when the adult child is in the early stages of his own recovery. The survivor may feel too hurt or vulnerable to talk about the past with his parent during this period – no matter how apologetic she is. Some survivors may need to distance themselves for a considerable time to work on their recovery process alone before they are able to enter into an active reconciliation with their parents.

AN EXAMPLE OF A BALANCED APOLOGY

Whether apologizing by letter or in person, we owe ourselves the fairness of explaining our extenuating circumstances. A balanced apology might sound something like this:

Son, I'd like to talk to you about how I treated you when you were very young. I really did love you, and I felt that I was doing the best I knew how. I realize now, however, that there were certain things I punished you for, and certain ways that I punished you that were unfair and excessively hurtful to you. I wish I could have known then that getting upset with you and over-focusing on your mistakes was not helpful to you in any way.

I deeply regret that I hurt you by blindly imitating my parents, and punishing you in the same unfair ways that they punished me. (The more specifically these ways are described, the more effective the apology.) It was hard to know then that this was actually abusive because everyone around me seemed to think that these were good parenting practices.

I am especially sorry that I punished you for crying, and forced you to "grow up" and be hard and tough so early in your life. I also feel very sad that there were many important things that I did not do for you as a child. I wish I had not been so neglectful of you. I wish I had taken a lot more time to notice you, to cuddle you, to play with you, and to talk with you. I wish I had let you know more directly about all the wonderful qualities I see in you.

Let me tell you about them now. (Elaborate as appropriate.) I guess I never told you as a child because I never received this kind of recognition from my parents. I didn't realize how important and beneficial this would have been for you. I was taught to believe it would make you spoiled and overconfident. I really am sorry that I

did not come to an understanding of this much earlier on. It would have enabled me to show you the caring, appreciation, and encouragement you so rightfully deserved.

I certainly understand that you may have some anger and hurt about these things. I feel you have a perfect right to be angry about my mistakes. I invite you to share with me your thoughts and feelings about what was missing and hurtful in your childhood. I would like to know if you can think of ways that I can make it up to you. And above all, I hope you can one day come to see that I never in any way meant to cause you any damage or unnecessary suffering.

This example is merely an outline. Its potential for healing is greatly enhanced when it is fleshed out with personal details. The more specific and elaborate the disclosure, the more the parent will recover from his guilt, and the greater the benefit to his adult child.

A detailed apology helps adult children enormously in their recovery process, especially if they are still struggling to reduce denial and minimization. Many of us feel lost in our efforts to accurately picture the earliest years of our life. Our dissociation was so great that we were seemingly sleepwalking through our formative years without registering much of what was going on. For many of us, the accurate reconstruction of the past is a puzzle whose pieces only become gradually available. Our parents are often the only source of the most important pieces. My mother's dying confession to me about her terrible abusiveness was an invaluable turning point in my recovery.

As a therapist, I see many recovering parents "black-and-whiting" themselves about how badly they parented. Survivors of toxic shame themselves, they often focus only on their parenting mistakes. Yet, I have never met anyone actively pursuing recovery who on closer examination did not actually serve their children in some significant ways.

In this light, it is appropriate to include in the latter section of the letter of apology specific information and anecdotes about how you did love, appreciate, and serve your child. To be effective, this needs to be done in the spirit of giving your child a full and balanced picture of her childhood. However, if this information is presented in a way that minimizes or dismisses the gravity of her actual childhood suffering, the effect is usually counterproductive.

The timing of apologetic disclosure is important. Just as the adult child is not always ready to hear about the past, the recovering parent may also need considerable recovery work on her own losses before she is adequately prepared to seek forgiveness. If at all possible, you are best advised to wait until you have achieved a modicum of self-compassion. Otherwise, you may tumble into toxic shame when and if your adult child expresses anger and blame about your confession.

It is also important to note that most recovering parents cannot listen to an adult child's anger and blame indefinitely – no matter how much recovery they have. There are only so many apologies that can be uttered for any given unfairness before it needs to be put to rest as an ongoing item of blame. As we saw in [Chapter 7](#), most of our blame, especially the charged portion, can be effectively angered out without a parent's presence. Moreover, no one benefits when our anger is communicated abusively to our parents.

We benefit the most from directing our charged anger at our internalized parents rather

than our real-life parents. The inner critical parent, with its arsenal of derogatory messages and tapes, is now the key source of our ongoing self-hatred and toxic shame.

The resolution of unfinished business between the adult child and recovering parent often requires ongoing communication. Because of its charged nature, this dialogue may at times break down into further upset and frustration. Considerable patience is often necessary for healing old wounds to real intimacy and trust. If and when the reconciliation process breaks down or becomes destructive, it may be helpful to seek the aid of a therapist who specializes in recovery from the dysfunctional family.

When the process of repairing (“re-pairing”) the parent/adult child relationship is most powerful, both parties sometimes grieve together while “processing” unresolved, historical hurts. I have witnessed such poignant occurrences on a number of occasions as a therapist. When a parent cries in sorrow for having hurt his child, the adult child is often naturally moved to tears. It is stirringly therapeutic to finally experience such visible compassion from a parent. Strong feelings of love and forgiveness frequently accompany such shared moments.

As wonderful as these experiences are, they do not guarantee permanent forgiveness. Because the unfoldment of the childhood abuse picture is typically gradual, subsequent recollections of unprocessed trauma sometimes displace fledgling sentiments of forgiveness with feelings of anger and alienation. These hostile feelings may temporarily destroy previous gains in intimacy.

Neither survivor needs to despair about such setbacks. If both parties recommit to nonabusive discussion, they can work through “new” reverberations from the past to restimulate feelings of forgiveness. Once these disruptions are successfully negotiated a number of times, trust grows that future upsets will be resolved in a manner that actually deepens intimacy.

Two final comments bear emphasizing here. Regardless of how helpful and desirable it may be, no one needs an apology from their parents in order to recover. Similarly, parents do not need the forgiveness of their children in order to forgive themselves for past mistakes. The most important forgiveness in recovery – self-forgiveness – is found in the sanctuary of the self.

FORGIVENESS, REPARENTING, AND THE INNER CHILD

Probably I too would have remained trapped by this compulsion to protect the parents . . . had I not come into contact with the Child Within Me, who appeared late in my life, wanting to tell me her secret . . . now I was standing at an open door . . . But I could not close the door and leave the child alone until my death . . . I made a decision that was to change my life profoundly . . . to put my trust in this nearly autistic being who had survived the isolation of decades.

– Alice Miller

The steps for seeking forgiveness outlined above can be used by all survivors, not only dysfunctional parents. Almost all of us are at times terrible parents to our inner children.

As our inner children wait for us to reparent them, they hope that we will apologize and make amends for all the years we imitated our parents’ abuse and neglect. Our inner children

need to hear that we are sorry for not protecting them from the inner critical parent, and for not giving them love, support, and encouragement.

Unfortunately, many of us find it difficult to apologize because as children we learned to associate apologies with admissions of defectiveness and worthlessness. Many of us unconsciously believe we have already made a lifetime's worth of apologies. We are now loathe to apologize in any way – internally or externally. Fortunately, we are now in the position to learn how to apologize while maintaining our self-esteem. Unashamed apologizing is, in fact, a sign of high self-esteem. Real self-esteem remains intact in the face of failures as well as successes.

Many of us also have difficulty apologizing to our inner children because we don't have authentic relationships with them. We never connect with them in a meaningful, substantive way because we are so afraid of their pain and their memories. Our inner children are as afraid of us as they were of our parents. Why wouldn't they be? We treat them as poorly as our parents did and we are even more inescapable than they were.

When we constantly shame our inner children for having feelings and needs, they hide from us. Most of us only pay lip service to reparenting them, and reflexively turn them away in disgust whenever they manifest in any truly childlike way. Most inner children languish eternally in the dark, lonely prison of the unconscious, hopeless of ever being welcomed to participate fully in life. Perhaps this is why we find the concept of hell so believable.

If we are sincere about our amends to our inner children, we will show them compassion for how hard and lonely their lives have been. We will join them in feeling sorry (sorrow) for themselves. We will welcome their fountains of uncried tears and infernos of rage, and validate their just complaints about massive amounts of unfair punishment and neglect. We will allow them to blame us and our parents for having betrayed them so repeatedly. We will end once and for all the obnoxious practice of dismissively comparing their pain to that of children in some forlorn land or more dramatically abusive family.

SEEKING FORGIVENESS FOR OUR OWN POOR REPARING

No one ever perfects reparenting. We are bound to at least occasionally repeat some of our parents' mistakes, no matter how good our intentions. Repetition compulsion is a truly daunting force. Often without realizing it, we become impatient and reject our inner children when they are tired or lonely or simply wanting our attention. Such familial reenactment usually makes them vanish from consciousness, often without a sound or stirring. Not until we try to reconnect with them, do we suddenly realize that all the vividness we have built in our relationship with them has disappeared.

Nonetheless, reparenting failures are quite repairable as our inner children are remarkably receptive to sincere apology. Our inner children have an incredible capacity for forgiveness. They forgave an enormity of parental unfairness before they despaired of ever being in a loving relationship.

We can apologize to our inner children by telling them we are sorry for having hurt them. We can invite them to be sad and angry about our past betrayals. Acknowledging their need to grieve our failure to love and protect them proves we take their hurt and pain seriously,

especially when it is our fault.

Our inner children will be more receptive to our apologies if we remind them of our extenuating circumstances. We can tell them that we are not perfect, that we are still learning how to reparent, and that we sometimes unintentionally and absentmindedly reenact old shamings simply out of habit and not because we are displeased with them.

We can solidify our apologies to our inner children by renewing our commitment to champion them, to fight off toxic shame, and to replace it with loving words and actions. Our inner children trust our apologies as sincere to the degree that we practice nurturing reparenting. Our ongoing active support lends credence to our petitions for forgiveness.

Finally, we can enlist our inner children's support in our reparenting efforts by asking them to let us know when they feel punished or abandoned. We can insure them we will welcome the healthy anger that instinctively arises in them whenever we behave like our parents.

FORGIVENESS AND BLAME AND THE INNER CHILD

Whenever I realize that I have once again alienated my inner child with abusive self-talk, I apologize to him in the following manner. (This apology was born out of my grave disappointment in temporarily losing the beautiful, enlivening relationship I had created with my inner child. It came to me in a meditation immediately subsequent to the grieving of this loss.)

Hey Pete – I don't know where you are, but I'm guessing I let you down again. I know I promised not to shame you or forget you like mom and dad did, but I bet I did it again without even realizing it.

I bet you're mad at me, and hiding like you used to hide in that closet when mom was in one of her moods and taking it out on you. I know I must seem just like her, but please remember how much kinder I am these days than she was.

I'd really like you to tell me how I let you down. It's really okay if you're mad at me. If I've hurt you, then I'm to blame. I'm so sorry that I'm still mean to you sometimes. Please tell me what I did so I can be extra careful not to do it again. Please give me a chance to make it up to you.

For the first time in months, I heard the faint, young voice of my inner child deep inside me. He was angry:

Yeah, you liar! You liar! You promised and you broke your promise. You're just like THEM. You don't mean any of those nice things you say. You say you love me but you don't really care. You said we'd go to the beach after you finished your paperwork and we didn't go. You told me you'd spend time every day checking in with me, and all you do is run from one thing to the next.

And you said I could tell you if someone hurt my feelings, but

you told me to shut up when I was upset because that guy yelled at us for making a bad pass in the game. You said you wouldn't shame me for making a mistake, and you called me all kinds of names for missing three shots in a row at basketball. You're a bully just like them. You only like me if I'm perfect or if I'm no bother!

I must have been in a place of grace that day, because I was effortlessly receptive to my inner child's justifiable anger and healthy blame. In fact, his communication made me cry. I cried in relief to hear from him again, and I cried in grief for the part of me that had suffered so much abandonment, and had once again been abandoned. (As I write, I cry again – delicious tears of gratitude – for the enlivening relationship I maintain with my inner child by allowing him his healthy anger at me.)

I not only felt grateful for the aliveness of this reconnection with my child-self, but I also saw quite clearly the tremendous accuracy and usefulness of his feedback. Fortunately, I was able to immediately validate his feelings. I replied:

Oh Pete, I am really sorry! You're so right and I'm so glad you're telling me. I was acting just like mom and dad! And that's absolutely the last thing I want to do. You're right to blame me. When you tell me how unfair I am to you, it helps me to remember not to be like them. When I was little I wanted to be just like them and sometimes I forget that I'm copying their meanness. I really want to stop doing that. You can be angry at me any time I do. That helps me to remember and to keep my word to absolutely always be on your side.

As our dialogue continued, my inner child not only forgave me but also warmly and excitedly reengaged me. His forgiveness came so effortlessly when I validated his anger that I was truly astounded. Being allowed to voice a fair complaint was truly transformative for him. After all, he had never before been allowed to express blame at an adult's unfair treatment. This new permission seemed to create a great deal of trust between us.

I wish I could say that I only required one such dialogue to cure me of betraying my inner child. It has, in fact, taken many such dialogues to keep my relationship with him alive, for I continue to be an imperfect reparenter. However, by remaining open to our dance of forgiveness and blame, I am always able to heal my reparenting mistakes. This is especially true because over time I shame and abandon him less and less frequently, and because I devote increasing amounts of time to welcoming his input and engaging his passion.

We can all use some version of this process to make amends for the inevitable mistakes we make as reparenters. How wonderfully ironic that greeting our inner children's complaints and hurt feelings enables us to become more loving and functional parents to ourselves.

With ongoing practice, we make possible the delightful experience of being easily forgiven by our inner children. As our inner children forgive us and feel safe enough to participate in our lives, we are enriched by their unique perspective and vital presence. Their infectious curiosity about and fascination with the infinite, everyday wonders of life can then

awaken our awe for God's creation. In his poem *It Depends On You*, the poet Angelus Silesius reminds us:

*If in your heart you make
a manger for his birth
then God will once again
become a child on earth.*

SELF-FORGIVENESS

*For each of the ways I have hurt myself through action or inaction,
out of fear, pain, and confusion, I now extend a full and heartfelt
forgiveness. I forgive myself. I forgive myself.*

– Jack Kornfield

Apologizing to the inner child for lapses in reparenting is a powerful pathway into self-forgiveness. As we accrue experiences of being forgiven by our inner child, we usually become more extensively forgiving of ourselves. *The Flowering of Self-Forgiveness* is a poem I wrote about this:

*Forgiveness
begins with the self,
and comes not into flower,
unless it germinates, roots and grows
as a perennial in the
garden of the heart
merciful to itself.
Though there is no eternal spring or summer in the heart,
there will be abundant flowering
as the inner sun of self-love
and the crystalline waters of
self-compassionate understanding
nurture endless bloomful seasons
of redemptive self-forgiveness.
As much as I can forgive myself,
that much can I forgive others.
What I really forgive in others
is an old pain of mine,*

*released from self-hate
and soothed and cared for
like a bird
with a broken wing.*

SELF-FORGIVENESS AND THE FORGIVENESS OF OTHERS

What closes my heart to me, closes my heart to you.

– Steven Levine

Without feelings of self-forgiveness we are closed to the possibility of receiving the forgiveness of others. Many of us are ruthlessly unforgiving of ourselves when we discover we have inadvertently hurt another. Our hurtfulness seems so unforgivable that we are too ashamed to attempt an apology – or we go to the other extreme and apologize for every subsequent breath we take. Both positions are so entrenched in self-disgust that we cannot accept genuine forgiveness even when it is offered to us.

We can, nonetheless, learn to express genuine sorrow about hurting others without collapsing into paroxysms of self-hatred and toxic shame. No one's dedication to recovery, no matter how ardent, prevents him from occasionally mimicking his parents' hurtfulness. When we are committed to decreasing our unconscious hurtfulness, we owe ourselves forgiveness.

As we cultivate self-forgiveness, it eventually becomes evident that we also deserve the forgiveness of others. Their forgiveness will of course come easier if we also cultivate tolerance and understanding of their inadvertent hurtfulness.

SELF-FORGIVENESS OF PAST MISTAKES AND DIE-HARD HABITS

*Man is punished by his sins not for them. And so each day he must
forgive himself, again and again.*

– Sheldon Kopp

All of us have in the past, especially via repetition compulsion, committed blameworthy acts. Once we fully apologize for these transgressions, we need and deserve our own forgiveness. There must come a time in recovery when we stop flagellating ourselves and grant ourselves a final pardon – whether or not we are forgiven by those we hurt. I mourn to see many clients and friends holding themselves in perpetual blame for past abuses that they no longer commit. The relentless process of self-blame that was instilled in us in childhood must be challenged.

The same holds true for the present. Many codependent survivors beat themselves unmercifully for minor and innocent insensitivities that they wouldn't think of punishing in others. When we sincerely apply ourselves to eliminating the vestiges of our old abusive habits, we owe ourselves the same tolerance for mistakes that we easily give to others. Perhaps Stephen Levine's meditation on self-forgiveness will help us accomplish this:

Let that unworthiness come up, that anger at yourself – let it all fall away. Let it all go. Open to the possibility of forgiveness . . . It is so painful to hold yourself out of your heart. Bring yourself into your heart . . . Using your own first name, in your heart say, “I forgive you” to you . . . Open to self-forgiveness. Let go of that bitterness, that hardness, that judgment of yourself . . . Let some glimmering of loving-kindness be directed toward yourself. Allow your heart to open to you. Let that light, that care for yourself, grow.

SELF-FORGIVENESS AND ENTRENCHED SELF-HATRED

When working with forgiveness, start with the little things . . . don't defeat yourself by going for the hardest first.

– Stephen Levine

Despair is directly proportionate to the energy and substance used in the service of self-hate. Emotional well-being and relative freedom from destructive inner turmoil are directly proportionate to the energy and substance used in the service of (self) compassion.

– Theodore Rubin

In our efforts to cultivate self-forgiveness, most of us initially experience many failures and many regressions into toxic self-blame. In early recovery we may feel discouraged to notice how often we fall back into cursing ourselves or our inner children. Sometimes we feel powerless to stop ourselves from chanting our personal litanies of self-hatred.

Here as much as anywhere, we need to cultivate patience and self-forgiveness, for we can always eventually return to a self-supporting stance. Sometimes this can be achieved by following Gaye Hendrix's paradoxical advice “to love yourself even when you find yourself temporarily lost in self-hatred.” Hendrix recommends self-love for all painful internal experiences:

There ought to be something more active to do with feelings and other things we need to deal with. Loving yourself, though, seems to be the one thing that we usually forget to do. And naturally it is the one thing that, if we do not do it, will bring us and our growth to a screeching halt. When you are feeling that impatience, that need to *do* something, try loving yourself for feeling that way, then do the most loving thing you can manage.

Hating yourself for hating yourself is one of the most stalwart bastions of toxic shame. It is a process that quickly spirals downward into despair. We can also decrease self-hatred by

aggressively refusing to attack ourselves, and by shifting the blame of self-hatred from ourselves to those who taught us to loathe ourselves in the first place.

Unfortunately, there are some occasions when nothing serves to rescue us from self-hatred. Sometimes our only resort is to follow Carl Jung's advice: "... batten down the hatches and weather out the emotional storm." Such experiences teach us that no intense emotional upset lasts forever. Indeed, if we stay with inner emotional turmoil long enough and fully feel it, it eventually dissolves and is replaced by a different inner experience.

SELF-FORGIVENESS AND EXISTENTIAL PAIN

Many of us become so addicted to self-blame, that we automatically take responsibility for misfortunes that we have done absolutely nothing to cause. I once had three different clients in one week claim that the 1989 San Francisco earthquake was caused by their "bad" thoughts.

We are all subject to tragedies over which we have no control. As Harold Kushner points out in *Why Do Bad Things Happen To Good People*, we must forgive ourselves for existential sufferings that occur as a natural part of the human condition.

In *Existential Psychotherapy*, Irwin Yalom eloquently elaborates on how we all, through no fault of our own, periodically suffer from loneliness, accident, loss, and death. No matter how many friends we have, we all sometimes feel hopelessly alone. No matter how much security we amass, we all lose things and people that we cherish.

These losses are painful enough in their own right without the added weight of self-blame and self-condemnation. We need our own mercy and forgiveness most at those awful times when fate deals us an unfair blow. We must detach from the legacy of being given no quarter in childhood at such times, and create a self-soothing haven in our hearts for ourselves. Perhaps we can even learn to adopt Robert Bly's wise perspective at such times:

Tragedies, then, are not so much about personality flaws as about the depths that call up to certain men and insist that they descend.

SELF-FORGIVENESS, OTHERS' FORGIVENESS AND EXTENUATING CIRCUMSTANCES

Do unto yourself as you would have others do unto you.

– Herbie Monroe

Sincere, non-groveling apologies enhance trust and build intimacy. The skills we acquire from apologizing to our inner children can be used to make amends with others.

Many of us, however, find it difficult to talk about our extenuating circumstances, no matter how pertinent they are. Even though our court system allows us to plead extenuating circumstances in our defense, many of us come from backgrounds where excuses were categorically forbidden.

Most dysfunctional parents react to their children's excuses as if they are further proof of blameworthiness. Attempts to explain are often "greeted" with intensified punishment. Do you have any unpleasant reverberations with these stock phrases: "What kind of sorry excuse is that?" "Don't make it worse on yourself by giving me one of your stupid little excuses!" "I don't care who took your pen (hat, shirt, bike, etc.), you little brat, I still have to buy another one!" "If you try to get out of it now, you'll really be in trouble!" "I can see in your eyes that you did it – don't make me hit you harder by lying about it!" Because of the prevalence of this kind of abuse, "making an excuse" has become widely taboo in our culture.

I remember a horrible day in childhood when my instinct to invoke my extenuating circumstances was finally extinguished. While walking home from my friend's house I was "jumped" and thrashed by a group of boys. My pants were torn in the process. When I arrived home, my mother was furious about my disheveled appearance, and refused to hear about my innocence.

My plea that it was not my fault infuriated her: "Don't give me any of your lame excuses. They're your pants. You're wearing them and you're responsible!" She not only "knocked the living daylights" out of me, but she also "broad-sided" me with the worst punishment of all – the dreaded "Wait till your father comes home."

All day long I paced in my room in the excruciating timelessness of waiting for a beating. I periodically hoped halfheartedly that my macho father, who had surely suffered similar unprovoked assaults as a child, would understand. And so, I anxiously obsessed all day on how to state my case.

When he finally came home I tried to blurt out my defense. Instantly incensed, he made a point of systematically smacking me around twice: "This is for tearing your pants, and this is for trying to get out of it."

So died my hope of ever appealing to them or any other authority figure for clemency. I knew from then on that I would have to accept total blame for any mishap I was involved in, however incidentally.

Historical traumas like mine make many of us reluctant to appeal to mitigating factors. As in childhood, we often accept others' harsh judgments about our inadvertent wrongs without standing up for ourselves – inwardly or outwardly. Instead, we commonly retreat into silence as our inner critic adds its choruses of shame to whatever condemnations we have unprotestingly accepted.

Some of us also experience the other side of this dynamic. We forbid everyone else from explaining the extenuating circumstances around their mistakes or unfair acts because we have not reclaimed our right and ability to cite our just excuses (to ourselves, as well as others).

There are two major extenuating circumstances to which we can rightfully appeal when we ask others to forgive us. The first is that we are human, and by nature imperfect and prone to making mistakes. I do not have a perfect memory, and I may one day forget a commitment I have made to you. I do not always move gracefully and I may drop and break something valuable of yours. I do not always know when I have repressed an upset about something, and I may occasionally respond unfairly to you in an overcharged manner.

If these incidents are not habitual, and not a passive-aggressive acting out on my part, then I need to forgive myself for not being a perfect friend. I can also reasonably hope that you too will forgive me once I fully apologize to you.

The second extenuating circumstance is that we are all subject to repetition compulsion

and liable to occasionally mimic our parents' unfairnesses. How can we know about egalitarian love when we come from families in which experiences of fair and respectful relating were rare or nonexistent? We are all destined to occasionally be insensitive to our intimates while we are learning to relate more healthily.

When we discuss the specifics of our mitigating circumstances with those we hurt, they may be able to see that our insensitivity was unintentional.

Here is an example of this. I once became demonstrably upset with my partner because she set the table "wrong." Because of my emotional recovery work, I immediately realized I was overreacting. As I tuned into my inner experience, I discovered that my overreaction arose from an aspect of my childhood abuse that I had not fully resolved. I suddenly remembered my mother's habitual, pre-dinner volatility. How many countless times had she screamed at me or my sisters for not setting the table correctly?

As I described this to my partner by way of apologizing to her, she reverberated with the grief I still held over these old painful incidents. Being a good friend, she not only allowed me to vent this old pain, but also expressed empathic anger about my mother's bullying. Out of this interchange came the understanding and compassion that allowed both of us to feel authentically forgiving toward me. Over time, self-forgiveness and the forgiveness of others augment each other as mutually complementary processes that allow us to become increasingly compassionate and forgiving.

When we communicate our extenuating circumstances in a way that has room for apologies, grief, amends, and revised intentions, we make tremendous gains in our intimacy and trust with others and with ourselves. My newfound ability to apologize with genuine sorrow, while maintaining my self-esteem, sometimes strikes me as the most cogent evidence that I have at last become a full-fledged adult.

MUTUAL FORGIVENESS

. . . or maybe we cross from the one to the other only on a bridge of grief.

– Howard Nelson

A person who has consciously worked through the whole tragedy of his own fate will recognize another's suffering more clearly . . . He will not be scornful of other's feelings, whatever their nature, because he can take his own feelings seriously. He surely will not help to keep the vicious circle of contempt turning.

– Alice Miller

Relationships are fortified by mutual permission to talk about extenuating circumstances. We operate at a higher level of love when we agree to discuss and work through any pain that transfers from the past and attaches to our current interactions. The most compelling extenuating circumstances are often the previously undiscovered traumas from the past that typically only

surface in consciousness as intimacy deepens.

Here is a devised illustration of how trust can grow from the mutual discussion of extenuating circumstances. You and I are walking down the street together when I trip and stumble awkwardly for a few steps. Without guile – but unconsciously imitating one of your sarcastic parents – you laugh and exclaim that I’m clumsy and tell me I’ll never be Fred Astaire. This triggers my sensitivity from years of hurtful, childhood teasing and I suddenly feel very upset. I feel ashamed and struggle with an impulse to react angrily.

Although my emotional reaction is dramatically out of proportion to the relatively minor sting of your teasing, it is an understandable emotional flashback. However if I do not realize I am experiencing you through the filter of decades of severe teasing, I may become sullen or accuse you of hurting me. If I do the latter, I may trigger a corresponding emotional flashback of shame and anger in you. Perhaps you were told over and over by a destructive parent that you were a hurtful child who always said hateful things. You too suddenly may feel intense humiliation or anger – disproportionate to the severity of our misunderstanding.

If we are both ignorant of the primary source of our intense feelings, our interchange will typically devolve into a variety of intimacy-destroying misunderstandings. Either or both of us may blast out abusively in anger, and escalate our disaffection; or either or both of us may contract and retreat into shame or fear, and cover up our distress with silence or a distracting change of subject.

If we react with unbridled anger, we are unconsciously purging our unprocessed anger about childhood hurt onto each other. This may further deteriorate as we both become increasingly overwhelmed – flashing back to the times we were raged at in childhood. We may even wind up in an abusive fight, regressing into rage in the same awful ways as our parents. One or both of us may end up so upset or afraid that we decide to end our relationship.

At the other extreme, our fear and shame may prohibit us from exploring our strong emotional reactions to each other, and we may retreat into our old defenses of denial and dissociation. A thick emotional wall may then arise between us, and we may gradually lose interest in continuing our friendship. It has been my observation that many essentially sound relationships end tragically in such ways.

UNSCRAMBLING THE MIX OF PAST AND PRESENT PAIN

If we are to keep our relationships healthy and intact, we must learn how to talk about extenuating circumstances. This not only keeps the process of mutual forgiveness alive between us, but also allows us to avail ourselves of the healing opportunities that arise when past pain attaches to present upsets. To make the most of these opportunities, we must recognize when we are embroiled in an emotional flashback. If we do not, we are likely to summarily transfer old upset feelings onto our current intimates instead of redirecting them to their original source in the past.

Once I realize I am in the midst of an emotional flashback, I can tell you that this is the source of my disproportionate upset. In this vein, the following is an example of how I might respond to the interchange described in the previous section:

I'm really sorry about what just happened. I'm just now realizing that I really overreacted to your comment about my stumbling because of an old unresolved hurt of mine. Even though I momentarily thought you were trying to hurt me, I now realize you, of course, did not intend to. You've always been a wonderful friend to me, and I'm sorry that some of my past "stuff" got stirred up and attached to what just happened between us.

As I focus on the feelings of anger, fear and shame that were triggered by your comment, I am reminded of all the times I was cruelly teased by my family for simple mistakes and accidents. I actually feel the pain of it now as I see the derisive looks on their faces.

I also "get" why I am especially sensitive around this issue. I bet I was called "clumsy" a thousand times as a kid. I shudder when I remember that time in front of all my relatives when my mother screamed "clumsy idiot" as I tripped on the edge of the living room rug.

As I focus more on these feelings, I also remember my mother telling me I looked spastic the very first time I got up the courage to dance. It was at my cousin's wedding. I felt so humiliated that I didn't dance again for fifteen years. Wow, am I pissed off and sad about that!

God! I'm enraged about how much of that crap I had to put up with. I'd like to scream for every time my mother humiliated me in public. I'm sure sorry that some of my anger just leaked out on you.

And, although I do feel some relatively mild anger about your remark, and would like to ask you not to tease me again in such situations or in that way, I bet ninety-five percent of what I'm feeling is about how incessantly my parents picked on me.

Damn! I'm so furious about their bullying. I wish I could go back in time as the adult I am now to every one of those occasions. I'd make them see how cowardly they were to pick on someone so small and defenseless. I'd use this anger I'm feeling now to put an instant stop to their abuse.

Depending on where we were, and our degree of familiarity with each other and this process, I might even turn aside at this point and do something more intensely cathartic, like yelling at imagined representations of my parents or throwing a rock at a wall.

At suitable intervals, I would also invite you to focus on whatever it is that you bring from the past to this situation. In so doing, I would welcome you to express the feelings you discover as you search for the antecedents of your reactions to me.

We are immeasurably enriched when we have an intimate who is willing to mutually explore and work through reemerging childhood pain with this perspective. Our recovery is greatly enhanced by the nonabusive venting of the old anger and tears that we uncover in free

associating about a hurt that has arisen between us.

When we work through our upsets in constructive ways, we gain a greater degree of sensitivity to each other's needs for safety. This creates the trust that allows our communication to become more vulnerable and authentic, a condition fundamental for the blossoming of real, feeling-based forgiveness.

Moreover, as our recovery progresses, we are decreasingly affected by lingering childhood hurt. There is less undischarged pain from the past to emotionally contaminate the present. Emotional flashbacks occur less frequently and intensely, and are identified more readily. We are increasingly liberated from mis-attributing emotional upset to our intimates.

AUTHENTICALLY FORGIVING ONE'S PARENTS

If you let yourself feel the pain you carry, it will come as a relief, as a release to your heart. You will see that forgiveness is fundamentally for your own sake, a way to carry the pain of the past no longer.

– Jack Kornfield

Real forgiveness for our parents is the grace that is born out of effective grieving, and no amount of thought, intention, or belief can bring it into being without a descent into the realm of feeling. This is not to say that intention has nothing to do with forgiveness. Real feelings of forgiveness can be kept out of awareness if we believe that forgiveness is not possible. For this reason, the healthiest cognitive position to adopt toward forgiveness is an attitude of receptivity to its spontaneous and unforced appearance during or after grieving.

For most of us, the first real feelings of forgiveness come through a compassionate softening toward ourselves and our inner children. This typically occurs as our grieving becomes freed from shame. Our self-compassionate tears dissolve our denial and we are shaken by the tragedy of our loveless childhoods. Tenderness blossoms in our hearts toward the suffering children that we were. At last, we feel merciful toward ourselves.

As self-compassion deepens and begins to prevail, it evolves into self-protection. We renounce stultifying loyalty to family inheritances of habitual self-blame and self-abandonment. Perfectionism is finally challenged and we truly forgive ourselves for not being perfect. We denounce as preposterous the notion that we were unloved (not forgiven for being born!) because we were not beautiful enough, smart enough, athletic enough, smiling enough, helpful enough. We commit to fully loving and forgiving ourselves – foibles, mistakes, inconsistencies, feeling fluctuations and all.

As self-forgiveness matures, our hearts open to the possibility of authentically forgiving our parents. Self-forgiveness is an irreplaceable precursor for parental forgiveness. Unless parental forgiveness is grounded in a deep, forgiving compassion for ourselves, it is little more than an empty mental exercise.

When parental forgiveness is genuine and substantive, it usually arises through a

consideration of our parents' extenuating circumstances. When this occurs, we see the wounded children in them who were also victimized, and we feel sorry for them. We understand that their childhoods were as unfair and loveless as ours, and we commiserate with them. Commiseration then expands into compassion which in turn blossoms into forgiveness.

DYNAMIC FORGIVENESS

Out of the mud of grief grows the lotus of forgiveness.

– Robin Bishop

As emotional recovery matures, most of us feel increasingly forgiving. The most effective way to keep this progression alive is to remember that grieving the losses of childhood is an ongoing, lifelong process that sometimes temporarily displaces feelings of forgiveness. We maintain our emotional vitality as long as we do not fossilize our forgiveness or falsely invoke it to cover up revisitations of fear, hurt, or anger.

As real forgiveness is primarily a feeling, it is, like all other feelings, ephemeral – never complete, never permanent. Forgiving feelings come and go in unpredictable ways. No emotional state can be induced to persist as a permanent experience. As much as we might like to deny this, as much as this is a cause of ongoing life frustration for each of us, and as much as we are raised and continuously encouraged to choose and control our feelings, emotions are by definition of the human condition largely outside the province of choice and will.

Nonetheless, we can achieve a relatively constant position of forgiveness even though we cannot continuously feel forgiving. We may come to identify ourselves as “forgiving” in the advanced stages of recovery when we realize that effective grieving inevitably restimulates forgiving feelings.

The same is true about love. Although we cannot always feel loving, we can always return to love. With sufficient practice, grieving consistently moves us through disappointment and alienation back into love. Over time, this allows us to identify with love as our most essential characteristic, and to be fair and kind to our intimates even when we feel otherwise.

When we arrive at this point in our recovery, we can truly identify ourselves as loving persons even though we don't always feel loving. This is similar to how we might accurately characterize someone as energetic, even though s/he sometimes becomes tired or needs to rest.

Once we rediscover our loving, heart-centered essence, we can then act compassionately toward each other without saccharine displays of phony sweetness. Good parents do not always feel loving toward their children. With sufficient emotional recovery, however, they easily accept and work through their disaffected feelings so that real feelings of warmth for their children always return. The more parents cultivate fully feeling as a pathway for returning to love, the more they are able to treat their children tenderly during normal periods of impatience and frustration.

Gay Hendricks explicates this notion in regards to loving ourselves unconditionally:

The act of loving ourselves, though, seems outside of time and space,

so that it is available to us no matter what space we are in. In other words, it is just as possible to love yourself when you are stuck as it is to love yourself when you are free. At either end of the spectrum, loving ourselves seems like the only choice we have.

Thus, while we may not be able to choose our emotions, we have a great deal of choice about how we respond to them – and from them. We do not have to subscribe to all-or-none societal models that either deny feelings completely or act them out destructively.

If we uncover a new memory, struggle with an emotional flashback, or feel impeded by some vestige of our childhood abuse, we can allow the reemergence of blameful feelings toward our parents without becoming hostile to them or ourselves. Strengthened by new histories of more fluidly vacillating between emotional polarities, we can trust that we will eventually return to forgiveness once we have fully processed our reawakened childhood hurt.

As we become more fully feeling then, forgiveness becomes something we value and expect to reexperience. We do not, however, confuse our belief in its value with the belief that we can simply experience it whenever we so desire.

FORGIVENESS AS A SUBSET OF LOVE

Forgiveness is an act of the heart, a movement to let go of the pain, the resentment, the outrage that you have carried as a burden for so long.

– Stephen Levine

Like most transpersonal psychotherapists, I believe Love is the home we live in before incarnation and the home we return to when we die. This, for me, is one of the deepest meanings of the adage God is Love. I also believe that the more we recover our emotional natures, the more we are able to revisit this home throughout our lives.

Disappointment and loss temporarily block our loving appreciation of life until we work through the pain that naturally accompanies them. With practice, grieving becomes an increasingly efficacious tool for reconnecting with the loving Higher Self that lives in every human heart. When the fog of emotional pain is dispersed through grieving, the inner sun of love shines unobstructed once again on the self as well as others.

Love is the one absolute that can transcend the apparent duality, paradox, and ambivalence of all human experience. Love, when we are graced enough to experience it in its deepest spiritual and emotional manifestation, expands our awareness to perceive the essential unity and perfection of all things. Higher love allows us to contain and appreciate all polarities. Ken Wilber elaborates on this:

The point is not to separate the opposites . . . but rather to unify and harmonize the opposites, both positive and negative, by discovering a

ground which transcends and encompasses them both. And that ground is *unity consciousness* itself . . . When the opposites are realized to be one, discord melts into concord, battles become dances, and old enemies become lovers. We are then in a position to make friends with all of our universe, and not just one (the positive) half of it.

When I experience the loving quality of unity consciousness, I feel compassion for all beings regardless of their actions. I feel love for others regardless of where their behaviors fall on the continuums that stretch between the extremes of cruelty and compassion, betrayal and loyalty, withdrawal and engagement. When love expands my heart in this way, I see the cogency of everyone's extenuating circumstances and I find everyone forgivable.

This supernal experience of love is also impermanent. Yet, its effects are often sufficiently profound to convince us permanently of the supremacy of love. And although the glow of transcendent love gradually and inevitably wears off, it often opens us to more regular experiences of mundane love.

The fully feeling person regularly experiences love poignantly in such everyday forms as loving a child, loving a friend, loving nature, loving beauty, and loving music. Walt Whitman, who also equated Love and God, made the abundant availability of love in mundane life the key theme of his epic poem *Leaves of Grass*. This excerpt illustrates how love culminated in this feeling-ful sage:

*I see something of God in each hour of the twenty-four, and each
moment then,
In the faces of men and women I see God, and in my own face in the
glass;
I find letters from God dropped in the street, and every one is signed by
God's name,
And I leave them where they are, for I know that others will punctually
come forever and ever.*

Since all these forms of love are also ephemeral, the ultimate forgiving position is forgiving ourselves for falling out of love – with our children, our parents, our friends, our selves, or our lives. The sweetest paradox of all occurs when we forgive ourselves for feeling blame and for not always feeling forgiveness.

Love at any level is so marvelous that we repeatedly fool ourselves into believing we are feeling love when we are not. It cannot be overemphasized that covering up a disowned feeling with a counterfeit one merely moves us further away from love.

Disingenuous invocations of emotional love elicit more distrust than affection. Ersatz emotionality is like a band-aid that won't adhere to the suppurating wound it attempts to hide.

If feelings like love and forgiveness are impermanent, what can we do when we have gone too long without them? How can we soothe ourselves during extended periods of being isolated from that warm, tender sense of benevolence that emanates from our hearts? The modern mystic

Carol Ruth Knox answers these questions in this prose-poem about love:

*It comes and goes, doesn't it?
Sometimes related
to people and how they
treat us, and sometimes not
Sometimes related
to the moon
to personal finances
to the questions of life
to nothingness
to everything
to the seasons, the time
to the food we ate
to . . .*

*It would appear as if the art of loving is not whether you love
or not (we all do in our present way) but whether you trust that when
love leaves, it has a reason and it will return again. Always.*

*We humans are instruments for love by design.
(So is the whole universe!)*
*When love blows across us,
naturally we sing a love song.
And when there is no love wind to blow,
though it leaves us strange
and willow-like,
love has gone to an empty field where it fills its
wind sails again
so that it might return
and blow across our all too hungering instruments
one more time.*

What shall we do while we wait?

*We shall weep of course –
something as lovely as love
leaves a gaping hole when gone.*

*We shall remember love in our hearts and wait
tenderly and compassionately*

*with ourselves
as we wander in question
and doubt
until we remember,
“Love always returns.”*

How grateful I am for rediscovering my grief and for the many sojourns back to love it has brought me. Through grieving and openhearted communication with others, I have learned that even with anger or fear or shame in the foreground, love is my all-encompassing domain. I know that when my various feelings of separateness and suffering have been effectively felt, emoted, or communicated, I will once again return to love. My poem, *Puero Scorpio*, written when I emerged from my first dark night of the soul, describes my experience of inevitably being restored to love.

*I was born lonely,
to roam the ruins of emotional hunger,
scavenging for love
with endless pangs of never enough.*

*I am a builder of structures,
that burst unpredictably from their scaffolds
into the ruins of raw materials
that beg to be recycled in my endless
attempts
to cope with life's ubiquitous
changes of scenery and set.*

*I was born to suffer
and witness the tapestried crackwork of my heart.
I was born broke of heart
and broke of love,
and many times merely broke.*

*And yet sweet God
I praise thee,
and marvel at the spirit you gave me,
that rises anew
time after time
to find something new or old
about which I simply must
exult.*

*Oh how God loves the child!
and gives us all an eternal child
with whom we effervescently, everlastingly
rebirth and rebirth our scintillating joy;
with whom we wander fresh and new
in poignant richness to once again,
with sweet relieving wonder,
gaze inflamed
at the exquisite beauty of this
precious life.*

Innumerable rebirths through grieving bolster my faith that I will be consistently redelivered through fully feeling to the love in my heart that manifests as a gratitude for life. I love how this gratitude is described in the prayer of Saint Augustine:

*Ask the loveliness of the earth
the loveliness of the sea,
the loveliness of the wide airy spaces,
the loveliness of the sky,
the order of the stars,
the sun making the day light with its rays;
Ask the moon tempering the darkness of the night that follows,
the living things which move in the waters,
which tarry on the land,
which fly in the air;
Ask the souls that are hidden,
the bodies that are perceptible,
the visible things which must be governed,
the invisible things which govern;
Ask all these things,
And they will answer thee, See we are lovely.
Their loveliness is their confession.
And these lovely and beautiful things,
Who has made them,
Save Beauty immutable?*

And so, I close this book hoping you follow the example of William Butler Yeats:

*I am content to follow to its source
Every event in action or in thought;
Measure the lot; forgive myself the lot!
When such as I cast out remorse*

*So great a sweetness flows into the breast
We must laugh and we must sing,
We are blest by every thing,
Every thing we look upon is blest . . .*

and praying you receive the grace expressed in this excerpt from Jack Kornfield's *Mother of Mercy Meditation*:

*May all beings be free of suffering.
May all beings' hearts be open to their pain . . .
May all beings be at peace.
May all beings dissolve the shadows of the past into the light of the
healing present.
May we all live in mercy and care for each other.
And may we all come to treasure each other in ourselves.*

APPENDIX A

AN ASSESSMENT OUTLINE OF PARENTAL ABUSE AND NEGLECT ([Chapter 8](#) contains a more detailed exposition of these categories.)

ABUSE

Verbal

Name-calling, destructive or unfair criticism, sarcasm, teasing, verbal humiliation, character assassination, “laundry listing.” Lying, double binds, double standards: “Do as I say, not as I do.”

Spiritual

Religious training that says a child is essentially bad, the joys of life are sinful, or God is all about punishment. Beliefs that toxically shame healthy parts of the self, like sexuality or balanced self-interest. Original sin. Eternal damnation. Fundamentalism.

Emotional

Dumping anger or shame via facial expressions, body language, screaming, or charged tone of voice. Rage-aholism, hatred, humiliation, shaming, intimidation. Emotional incest: using child for parent’s emotional needs. Punishment for emotional expression. “Boys don’t cry.” “Nice girls don’t get mad.”

Physical

Most corporal punishment: face-slapping, punching, hair-pulling, hitting repetitively, ragefully, or too forcefully. Sexual abuse. Overdisciplining or overworking the child. Not allowing play. Making child into “human doing” vs. human being.

NEGLECT

Verbal

The “no-talk” rule. Unwillingness to consistently engage in conversation. Not allowing questions. The “armchair daddy” syndrome. “Kids should be seen and not heard.”

Spiritual

Lack of guidance on using prayer or meditation to connect with a loving Higher Power that may be appealed to for grace, help, or blessing. Failure to see essential goodness of child or support spiritual growth. Not teaching and modeling ethics and “right action.”

Emotional

Lack of tenderness, warmth, compassion, heart-centered emotional love. Disinterest and not caring. Lack of receptivity to child’s feelings. No validation of healthy anger. No apology for injustices. No modeling of the healthy expression of emotions. No humor or joy.

Physical

Poor grooming, diet, sleep, or exercise habits. Lack of touch or other healthy physical interaction. Toxic atmosphere that causes chronic tension, shallow breathing, hypervigilance, or dissociation (see [Chapter 6](#).) TV as a babysitter. Not instilling healthy habits of work and discipline.

AN OUTLINE OF HEALTHY PARENTING PRACTICES AND SKILLS*

VERBAL NURTURANCE: Eager participation in conversation. Generous amounts of praise and positive feedback. Willingness to entertain all questions. Teaching, reading stories, providing resources for ongoing verbal development.

SPIRITUAL NURTURANCE: Seeing and reflecting back to the child his or her essential good and loving nature. Engendering experiences of joy, fun, and love to maintain child’s sense that life is a gift. Spiritual or philosophical guidance to help child integrate painful aspects of life. Nurturing child’s creative self-expression. Frequent exposure to nature.

EMOTIONAL NURTURANCE: Welcoming and valuing of full emotional expression. Modeling nonabusive expression of emotions. Teaching safe ways to release anger that don’t hurt self or others (see [Chapter 5](#)). Love, warmth, tenderness, and compassion. Honoring tears as a way of releasing hurt. Being a safe refuge. Humor.

PHYSICAL NURTURANCE: Healthy diet and sleep schedule. Teaching habits of grooming, discipline, and responsibility. Helping child develop hobbies, outside interests, and own sense of personal style. Helping child balance rest, play, and work.

*Wherever practical, survivors can give themselves these kinds of nurturance if they were missing in childhoods. [Chapter 9](#) offers practical guidance for accomplishing this.

APPENDIX B

THE HUMAN BILL OF RIGHTS OF SELF-EXPRESSION*

1. I have the right to be listened to with respect.
2. I have the right to say no, to set limits, and to determine my own boundaries.
3. I have the right to make mistakes.
4. I have the right to have my own needs, feelings, opinions, beliefs, interests and preferences.
I have the right to like what I like and want what I want.
5. I have the right to change my mind. I have the right to decide on a different course of action.
6. I have the right to negotiate for change.
7. I have the right to ask for emotional support or help, accepting that there are limits to how much I can expect from anyone except myself.
8. I have the right to feel angry, and to express it in nonabusive ways.
9. I have the right to protest sarcasm, destructive criticism, and unfair treatment.
10. I have the right to refuse to become involved in another's problems.
11. I have the right to feel ambivalent and to sometimes think or act paradoxically.
12. I have the right to sometimes do nothing, to waste time, and to refuse to be governed by the pressure to always be productive.
13. I have the right to be illogical in safe ways.
14. I have the right to play and to occasionally be childlike and immature.
15. I have the right to complain – about my own troubles and about the existential unfairness of life.
16. I have the right to make my own decisions, and to refuse unsolicited advice.
17. I have the right to move at a relaxed pace whenever practical.
18. I have the right to succeed, and to be proud of my accomplishments.
19. I have the right to like myself and value my uniqueness.
20. I have the right to say “I don't know,” “I don't understand,” or “I don't care.”
21. I have the right to follow or disregard the suggestions in this book.

*Adapted and expanded from the “Bill of Assertive Human Rights” in Manuel J. Smith's *When I Say No, I Feel Guilty*, and the bill of rights in Gravitz and Bowden's *Recovery: A Guide for Adult Children of Alcoholics*.

APPENDIX C

AFFIRMATIONS FOR REPARENTING THE INNER CHILD*

*Thoughts – just mere thoughts – are as powerful as electric batteries
– as good for one as sunlight is, or as bad for one as poison.*

– Frances Hodgson Burnett

INFANT

Welcome to the world.
I am so glad you were born.
You are absolutely perfect just as you are.
I am glad you are a boy/girl.
You are a delight to behold.
You are a gift to the world.
I love who you are.

TODDLER

All of your feelings are okay with me.
You can be interested in everything.
I love to watch you explore.
I am always glad to see you.
You can do things as many times as you like.
You can like what you like and want what you want.
I like it when you say no.
I like it when you let me know if I hurt your feelings.
You can go off on your own or be with me as much as you like.
It's okay for you to be angry, and I won't let you hurt yourself or others when you are. I love who you are.

PRE-SCHOOLER

I love how you speak and I love to listen to you.
I love how you sing and dance.
I like how you think for yourself.
You can think and feel at the same time.
You can make mistakes – they are your teachers.
You can know what you need and ask for help.
You can ask as many questions as you like.
You can have your own preferences and tastes.
You are a delight to my eyes.
I love who you are.

SCHOOL CHILD

It is always a joy to see you and be with you.
It is wonderful to converse with you.
You can trust your intuition to help you make choices.
I love how you have your own ideas and opinions.
You can choose your own values.
I love how you ask for what you want and need.
You can pick your own friends, and you don't have to like everyone.
You can learn when and how to disagree.
You can be fair with yourself and others.
You can sometimes feel confused and ambivalent, and not know all the answers.
I am very proud of you.
I love who you are.

*Adapted and expanded from John Bradshaw's PBS television series on the dysfunctional family.

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